

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE TEMPLE OF JUSTICE

PART II: THE SILVER HAND





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
TEMPLE OF JUSTICE**

Part II: The Silver Hand

Jupiter is trapped in an old fortress on an uninhabited island with no rescue in sight. He makes several attempts to escape but fails each time. He is on the verge of breaking down, having to contend with a very cunning villain who demands that he reveal the whereabouts of the Fiery Eye. Meanwhile, he learns that there is another item in play—the Silver Hand. Eventually, he is left with only one option—to resort to trickery to escape, and reunite with Pete and Bob so that The Three Investigators can proceed to solve the mystery once and for all.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Temple of Justice
Part II: The Silver Hand

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(Part 2: The Silver Hand)*

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1. Back at Home

Sunday, 14 September

The smell of Aunt Mathilda's incomparable cheese sauce was in the air when Jupiter entered the kitchen. He was glad to be home. The one-hour drive from the mercury mine in Elizabeth Lake back to Rocky Beach had given him the rest.

On the way back, he and Pete had not spoken a word to each other and Bob's attempts at mediation had not helped either. Moreover, he had made a fool of himself in his belief that he could discover something exciting in the mine. He had also got into a heap of trouble from Timothy the tour guide. His leg was extremely painful where the rock face of the shaft had scraped his skin. So his aunt's cheese sauce was the only thing that could halfway save the day.

Jupe was so hungry that he didn't even bother to change his soiled clothes before coming into the kitchen. "Mmm... that smells good! I'm starving!"

"Jupiter Jones!" Aunt Mathilda, who was just draining the macaroni, turned her head briefly and said sternly: "I'd love to send you to bed without supper tonight! That's how it was done in my day."

"What... what's wrong?" Jupiter asked timidly and looked questioningly at his uncle who was sitting at the table. However, Titus Jones only looked at his empty plate and remained silent.

"Don't act so hypocritical, you know very well! We had a call earlier. A certain Timothy from the mine in Elizabeth Lake told us what our esteemed nephew had been doing to pass the time this afternoon. Are you out of your mind?"

Jupe sighed. That was all he needed. "It was just a harmless situation that got a little out of hand. Timothy certainly exaggerated when he—"

"Out of hand?" Aunt Mathilda slammed the pot of macaroni down on the table. "Timothy said you were—goodness, Jupe, what happened to your leg!"

"It looks worse than it is," Jupiter asserted. Obviously his futile attempt to clean up the wound before coming home had not escaped his aunt's eyes.

"I don't believe a word you say!" Aunt Mathilda examined the bloodied wound. "This must be cleaned and bandaged immediately!"

"A bandage is well-intentioned, Aunt Mathilda, but definitely not at all necessary."

"Don't argue!" Aunt Mathilda grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him out of the kitchen and into the bathroom, where Jupiter had to stand in the shower cubicle. Carefully, Aunt Mathilda rinsed the wound, dabbed it clean and applied medication to the bright red scratches before getting the bandages from the cupboard.

"Aunt Mathilda, these are just a few scratches, I really don't need—"

"You leave that to me, please!" Aunt Mathilda hissed and set about bandaging Jupe's leg. "The man from the mine said you had gone away from the group although it was forbidden," she continued, "and you had gone into closed-off areas, which was strictly forbidden—into areas of the mine that were in danger of collapsing! And that you ended up using a dilapidated pit cage, which was absolutely forbidden. You put your lives in danger!"

"I told you—he exaggerated," Jupiter tried to play the matter down.

“Oh, and how to you explain this then?” She pointed accusingly to the bandage she had just finished with. “Are you telling me the man had just made all that up?”

“No, of course not, but—”

“Put on a fresh pair of pants and come back into the kitchen! The food is getting cold!”

Jupiter would have preferred to go to his room, but that would probably have caused even more trouble. So he returned to the kitchen two minutes later and hoped that the storm had cleared... but it had not.

“Pete, Bob and you are always in some kind of trouble!” continued Aunt Mathilda. “—And I know that it’s usually you who can’t keep your hands off trouble, Jupiter Jones! I’ve had enough of these adventures!” Angrily, she slapped sauce on his plate. “Why don’t you say something about it, Titus!”

“Your aunt is right,” Uncle Titus said dutifully, although he would probably have preferred to stay out of it all. “I understand that all this... investigation stuff excites you—lost treasures and stuff... manhunts. You just have to take better care of yourselves!”

“Take better care of yourselves? Titus, really! Jupe is behaving completely irresponsible! Either the boy will kill himself one day on one of these adventurous outings or he’ll end up in jail—that’s how it looks!”

Slowly Jupiter became angry. The sermon had been long enough, and his aunt was exaggerating wildly. “Now if I could just say something—”

“No, you can’t!” his aunt interrupted him. “You’re just making me dizzy and I really don’t want to hear any of your excuses today! I’ve had enough!”

“Fine,” Jupe said angrily and took his plate with both hands. “If I am not allowed to explain myself, surely my presence can be dispensed with.” He stood up with the plate, left the kitchen and then out of the house.

The Jones family home was a two-storey house situated next to the salvage yard, with a small gate separating them. Jupiter had been staying here with his uncle and aunt since he was just a small child after his parents had died in an accident.

Outside, Jupe was greeted by cool evening air. He opened the small gate and went into the salvage yard, which was dark and deserted at this hour. Only a little yellowish street lighting fell over the wooden fence. Jupiter walked across the yard and entered Headquarters through the Cold Gate. He took his mobile phone out of his back pocket and threw it on an armchair. Groaning and lost in thought, he then sat at the desk and ate the macaroni and cheese sauce.

He was already sorry that he had walked out of the kitchen in that manner. He rarely argued with his aunt, and hardly ever with his uncle. His outburst had been rash. If he had repentantly confessed his wrong-doing, everything would probably have been fine. As it was, he had to live for the rest of the evening with the feeling of guilt in his stomach for having reacted too harshly. On the other hand, he felt that his aunt had also reacted in a similar fashion!

Soon, the plate was empty, and Jupiter was not yet full. He could well have had a second helping, but his pride forbade it. Sighing, he got out of his chair and went to the fridge. All he found was a couple of bottles of Coke and half a pizza with a now rock-hard cheese coating. The pizza came from Pete and had been there for so long that Jupiter had no idea how long. The Second Investigator should dispose of his leftover food himself.

Jupiter was wondering if there might be half a bag of softened chips in some corner when a noise from outside made him sit up and take notice. It was the creaking of Green Gate One!

Could it be Bob or even Pete on a peace mission? Jupiter waited for one of them to come in, but it didn’t happen. Frowning, he turned to the ‘See-All’ periscope and peered into the

dark salvage yard.

There! Two figures were creeping around outside! They were at one side of the yard, where old cupboards, tables and chairs stood together under a homemade awning next to the fence. The two of them seemed to be looking for something. It wasn't Bob and Pete, perhaps thieves who were after some junk.

The First Investigator briefly considered calling the house and alerting his uncle, or the police right away. What if it wasn't thieves?

As quietly as possible, he slipped out through the Cold Gate. He could hear soft voices but could not make out what were said. The two figures were huddled between the furniture, whispering to each other. Jupiter crept closer until he could hear what they were saying.

"Are you sure you know where the secret office is?" asked a young male voice with an accent that Jupiter couldn't place at first.

"If I knew, I would have found it already," the other replied. "It's been years since I've been to this place. It was hidden somewhere here. You had to crawl through a tunnel, but it looks very different now."

"But you found the secret door in the fence."

"The fence hasn't changed... but the rest here is different."

Jupiter had heard enough. The two were looking for Headquarters! And one of the voices sounded familiar to him. It had an English accent. Anyway, the game of hide-and-seek was over.

The First Investigator cleared his throat and stepped into the strip of light from a street lamp. "Are you looking for me?"

The two boys flinched. One of them was small, black-haired and dark-skinned. Jupiter had never seen him before. The other was the exact opposite—tall, thin, and had very light hair.

"Gus!" Jupiter cried in amazement. "Is it really you? Gosh, this is a surprise!"

"Jupiter! You found us!"

Jupiter really hadn't expected to meet August August, known as Gus. Their last encounter was years ago! The First Investigator looked at him curiously. Gus now had short hair and his glasses were different. Only his thin, high-bridged nose was unmistakable.

Gus, in turn, seemed to have difficulty recognizing Jupiter, for instead of joy, confusion could be read on his face. Jupiter slapped the boy, who towered over him by half a head, on the shoulder in a friendly manner. "Don't you recognize me anymore? Don't tell me I've got fatter!"

"Jupiter," Gus said, finally smiling a little. "You caught us by surprise!"

"What are you doing here? Why are you sneaking around in the dark? You should have called!" Jupiter turned to the other boy who had been silently watching the reunion. "Hello. I'm Jupiter Jones." He held out his hand to him.

"Good afternoon," the boy said politely. "My name is Vikram. I come from India. I am a friend of August's."

"Nice to meet you. Gosh, Gus, it's really good to see you. This saves me from a messed-up day. Why didn't you let me know you were coming? Pete, Bob and I would have thrown you a party!"

"It was supposed to be a surprise," Gus explained.

"You succeeded without a doubt. That sneaking around... was that part of the surprise?"

"We didn't want to ring the bell because it's late," Gus continued. "I thought you might be at your headquarters, but I couldn't find it."

“It’s not here,” Jupe said. “It was hidden a little differently back then, but it was always over there.” He pointed at the other side of the salvage yard.

“Hmm... I must have got my orientation wrong,” Gus muttered.

“Come on, let’s go inside, it’s cosier than out here in the dark!”

Jupiter led Gus and his friend to Scrap Mountain and through the Cold Gate. Since Gus already knew the trailer from back then and Vikram was his friend, Jupiter had no qualms about letting them into the secret hideout.

“Do you want something to drink? I only have Coke or tap water though.”

“I’ll have a Coke with pleasure,” Gus said.

Vikram shook his head silently.

While he looked for a clean glass, Jupe eyed his old friend from England from the side. Gus seemed withdrawn to him, like he wasn’t looking forward to seeing each other. Had he perhaps hoped that Bob and Pete were here too?

The First Investigator’s gaze wandered to the boy from India. Vikram looked around the trailer attentively. His hair shimmered brown-black in the light of the desk lamp. It was combed deep into his dark, narrow face. His serious expression was enhanced by the unusual colour of his eyes. They shone in a bronze hue and had a watery glow.

“What brings you to California, Gus?” asked Jupiter, handing him the Coke glass. “Is it just to visit us?”

“Well, it’s like this—” Gus began, but then broke off uncertainly. “Maybe Vikram had better tell the story.” He took a sip of Coke and really avoided looking at Jupiter. Nervously, he picked up a white pen and scratched around with it on a notepad that was on the table.

Vikram took the floor. He spoke slowly, as if he had to gather the words first. English was audibly not his first language, but he used it with great accuracy.

“I have been looking for my father for a long time now. He disappeared from our home. I followed his trail. That’s how I met August. He is helping me. He told me about you, The Three Investigators. We came here so you could help because you were the last to see my father.”

Jupiter stumbled. “We saw him last? Wait a minute... who is your father?”

“His name is Rama Sidri Rhandur.”

2. 'Help!'

For a moment, Jupiter was speechless... and he wasn't often. "You are Mr Rhandur's son?"

Vikram nodded. "Do you remember him?"

"Of course I remember your father, although the last time we met was a while ago."

"Then you know why he came to America."

"Of course. How could I forget our search for the Fiery Eye! Did you just say we were the last to see your father? Are you saying he's disappeared since then?"

Vikram nodded. "My father left India over four years ago in search of the Fiery Eye and the Silver Hand. He never came back."

Jupiter was dismayed. "But... but we always thought he had gone back to Pleshiwar, if I remember rightly... in northern India."

Vikram nodded. "We waited. He never came back."

"I am very sorry for you, Vikram."

"It took me a long time to be able to come to America to look for him. It took me even longer to find a lead. It led to you."

The First Investigator thought sharply and recalled everything about the Fiery Eye case. They hadn't learned much about Mr Rhandur back then. He had appeared one day as a mysterious stranger and a few days later, he disappeared. However, Jupiter remembered very well how unscrupulously Rhandur had tried to scare The Three Investigators, but he kept that to himself. It would have been more than inappropriate to tell Vikram about his father's dark character traits in this situation.

"I'm sorry," Jupiter repeated, "but I'm afraid I can't help you. We didn't have much to do with your father and always thought he was back in India. I don't see how you're going to pick up the trail from here. It was all too long ago for that."

Vikram took the news with a calmness that stabbed Jupiter right in the heart. For years this boy had been waiting for his father, and for who knows how long he had been looking for him. Now this trail also went nowhere, and Vikram reacted as if he was already used to it, as if he had not expected anything else.

Jupe glanced at Gus, but he was still scratching the pen on the notepad. He looked strangely absent.

"Do you know where my father lived back then?" asked Vikram. "Maybe I can follow his trail from there."

Jupiter could hardly imagine that Vikram would manage to find his father again in this way, but he admired the boy for his persistence.

"There was something," it occurred to Jupiter. "Your father gave us a business card back then! We were supposed to contact him when we found the Fiery Eye..." He opened an old filing cabinet and rummaged around in it. Finally, he pulled out five red folders. He went through them until he found the right one.

"Got it!" he shouted, before throwing the rest of the folders on the armchair. "Carefully filed by dutiful Bob... and here's the business card!" He unfastened the staples and handed the card to Vikram. The card said:

Rama Sidri Rhandur
PLESHIWAR, INDIA

Under it was written in pencil the name and address of a motel in Hollywood.

"Hollywood is not far from here," Jupiter explained as he turned to the computer. He entered the name of the motel into the search engine. "And the motel still exists. If you want, we can go there together tomorrow. Bob and Pete will certainly come along. The Three Investigators have some experience with such cases. If you want to use our services, we can definitely try to help you!"

"Thank you," Vikram said, but Jupiter was not clear whether he meant 'yes thank you' or 'no thank you'.

"Vikram, you said earlier that your father was looking for something else besides the Fiery Eye. A silver hand? I've not heard of it before. What is it?"

Vikram looked at him attentively as he slowly pocketed the old business card. "Not important," said the boy from India.

"Well, even supposedly unimportant details can contribute to a better understanding of the overall situation."

Vikram ignored Juve's reasoning. "Is that all you know about my father?"

"At the moment, yes," Jupiter replied irritably. "Wait, no. Your father was also in contact with Mr Dwiggins at the time. That was Gus's great-uncle's lawyer. He has a law firm in Hollywood. Maybe he can think of something that will help you, but Mr Dwiggins should be treated with caution. He led us around by the nose back then and is not one hundred percent trustworthy."

"Do you have his address?" Vikram asked.

Juve checked the documents and gave him Mr Dwiggins's address—which was in an older part of Hollywood.

Vikram nodded curtly. "We will ask him." He stood up. "Thank you for your help and your time. We are leaving now."

"You're leaving already?" asked Jupiter in surprise.

Gus also rose. "I'm afraid we have to," he said evasively.

Jupiter eyed him. Something was wrong with Gus. He had been silent most of the time. Was it exhaustion after the long flight from England? Was he ill?

"Perhaps you can come by sometime in the next few days? I can ask Pete and Bob to be here."

"Of course," Gus said and smiled. He slowly put the pen he had been playing around with back on the table.

Gus's gaze became very insistent for a very short time, and suddenly Jupiter was sure—something was wrong here... but there was no time to think about it, because Vikram grabbed Jupiter's hand and shook it.

"Thank you," he said curtly and turned to leave.

"Wait, I'll show you out..." Juve said.

A moment later, they were outside and the Cold Gate fell shut.

As Juve was about to lead them to Green Gate One, he hesitated and said: "I might as well let you go out from the main gate. Hold on here a second, I'll go get the key." With that he rushed back into the trailer.

The First Investigator grabbed the key, and as he was about to leave, his gaze fell on the notepad and the white pen that Gus was fiddling with. He held up the notepad and took a closer look. Then he saw it—Gus had not just scratched randomly on it. He had scratched

something on it, but without using the ink tip. Jupe could make out the letters that had been scratched:

HELP!

3. Night Pursuit

The First Investigator opened his eyes and thought feverishly. A call for help from Gus! Jupiter must have been sorely mistaken about Vikram. Apparently Gus had been so scared all the time that he had not dared to say anything. Maybe the young Indian was even armed!

Jupiter had to do something quick before the two of them left!

Then he had an idea. He grabbed the pen, and rushed into the crime lab at the back of the trailer. He rummaged in a box of gadgets and then calmly left the trailer. When he was walking along the tunnel to the Cold Gate, he was fidgeting with the pen.

Outside the Cold Gate, he met up with his two guests, and led them towards the main gate. Along the way, Jupiter engaged in some small talk with Gus so as not to make Vikram suspicious.

“So how’s your dad?” Jupe asked.

“He’s fine,” Gus replied. “A bit lonely now that I have moved out to my own place.”

“Is that so?” Jupe remarked. “At least you have your independence now!”

All this while, Jupe observed Gus’s facial features, but he couldn’t figure out anything. In any case, Jupe’s brain went into overdrive. He had an idea, but he had to think a few steps ahead as time was of the essence. If he messed up, he might not be able to get to them again.

Outside the gate, Jupe saw a white van parked near Green Gate One. Gus and Vikram walked towards it. Jupiter followed, and took note of the licence plate number.

At the van, Gus got into the driver’s seat with Vikram beside him. Just as Gus closed the driver’s door, Jupiter put on a harmless smile and made a hand signal for Gus to lower the window.

“I forgot something, Gus,” Jupiter said and took the pen out of his pocket and handed it to Gus. “You left your pen in the trailer.” Then the First Investigator gave the English boy a barely perceptible nod.

Gus placed the pen in the storage compartment in front of Vikram and nodded back. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. See you very soon!”

“See you soon.”

Gus started the engine, flashed the headlights and the van started moving. The First Investigator looked at them going off.

Immediately, Jupe had to put his plan into action. He waited until the van turned the next corner, then raced back to the salvage yard through the main gate, and then scrambled into the trailer.

In there, he went back into the crime lab and stuffed everything he needed into his backpack. He reached for a bunch of keys, took his jumper from the back of the office chair, and another jacket from the hook on the wall. Then he rushed back outside the main gate and hastily locked it.

Next, he ran to a nearby footpath towards Coldwell Hill, where his motorbike was hidden in an old shed.

Jupiter pulled open the door. In no time at all, he put on his jumper and jacket. Then he took his helmet which was hung on the handle.

Suddenly something moved in a corner of the shed. Jupiter winced. Someone was lying there! He blinked. It was Rubbish-George, whom he had apparently just woken up! However, Jupiter didn't even have time to ask him what he was doing here. He ignored the tramp and pushed the bike outside, over the rubble in front of the shed to the road. There he pulled out of his backpack the tracking receiver he had taken from the lab. The corresponding transmitter was in the white pen he gave Gus. Jupiter then switched on the receiver.

A green dot flashed on the small display. It moved quickly to the edge of the screen. Soon the transmitter would be out of range!

Jupe jumped on the motorbike and revved the engine. As always, when he sat on it for the first time after a long while, he felt the utmost respect for the power of this machine. He could not become reckless, even if he was in a hurry. It was all too easy to lose control of the vehicle. He took one last look at the display. Then he stowed the device in the pocket of his jacket and rode off.

Gus had driven to the coastal road. It was not far to get there. At a junction, Jupe took out the receiver again. The van had turned right. They obviously didn't want to go to the motel whose address had been on Mr Rhandur's business card.

Jupiter took the road in a westerly direction. It was not busy on a Sunday evening, but fortunately busy enough not to attract attention. Jupiter picked up speed. With narrowed eyes, he rode with the steady stream of red tail lights, slowly overtaking one car after another, but the white van did not come into view.

As time went by, his heart sank. Had the van perhaps turned off long ago? Had he better stop and see if the tracking receiver was still getting the signal?

Then he suddenly saw the van in front of him! Jupiter rode close enough until he could see the number plate. Then he dropped back a little so as not to attract attention. Besides, with his helmet on, no one would recognize him in the rear-view mirror.

Jupiter resolved to alert Bob and Pete as soon as he had the chance. The arguments in the afternoon was forgotten. After all, this was an emergency!

However, this opportunity was a long time coming. The van drove on and on along the coast. They had already left Malibu behind and were now in the sparsely populated area outside Oxnard. Cold fog came up and drifted across the road in thick swathes. The cold began to gnaw at Jupiter's knuckles and creep under his jacket.

He cast a worried glance at the fuel gauge. The needle was slowly slipping into the red zone. There was still enough for about thirty kilometres, but after that it was over. Refuelling was out of the question as he would inevitably lose the trail.

Then the van suddenly turned left towards the sea. At the turn-off, a sign indicated that this was the way to a marina—a small marina.

To avoid attracting attention, Jupiter rode past the junction. Only a short distance further on was a restaurant. It was closed. Jupiter let himself roll onto the driveway and parked the motorbike. He removed his helmet and hung it on the handlebars. Then he took out the tracking receiver, looked at it to confirm that the beep was still there. He switched the device off and put it into his backpack.

From the restaurant, he looked at the van heading down three tight bends towards a small marina, which lay abandoned in the glow of yellow lanterns. The cones of the headlights cut through the fog before the van came to a stop in a small car park. Gus and Vikram got out and walked to the harbour area.

Jupiter was about to follow them, but first he had to inform Bob and Pete! He reached into his back pocket. His mobile phone was not there. He took off his backpack and rummaged through it. Nothing.

Then he remembered—he had taken the mobile phone out of his pocket right after he had gone into Headquarters! And after that, everything had happened so quickly that he hadn't thought about it at all.

In any case, there was no time to fret. He had to go after Vikram and Gus! Jupiter dug a piece of white chalk out of his backpack and drew on the pavement next to the restaurant, a question mark and an arrow pointing to the marina.

Then he cut short the winding road by running cross-country. The way down was steep. In the darkness, he had to be careful not to trip over something.

On reaching the car park, he saw that Gus and Vikram were walking to a jetty. There, boats and small yachts bobbed up and down. The lapping of the water seemed unusually loud to the First Investigator. Perhaps it was the fog that amplified the sounds.

Near the jetty was a steel container office of the harbour master. Jupiter used it for cover. Through a stained window he saw a bearded man sitting on a chair tilted far back with his arms folded, his cap pulled low over his face, and his feet on the desk. Jupiter could hear his snoring through the thin walls. The night watchman obviously didn't take his duties too seriously.

Gus and Vikram walked towards a small white yacht moored at the end of the jetty. The jetty itself was not lit. Jupe followed them unnoticed. Near a fishing boat, he crouched down. From here, he could read the name of the yacht written in curved letters on the hull: *Raider*.

An athletic woman with a blonde ponytail wearing a Tigers cap jumped off the deck onto the jetty. "You're back already!"

"The boy didn't know much," Vikram replied.

"The boy? I thought there were three."

"The other two were not there."

"Does that mean you just left?"

"That's what it means, Helena."

"Maybe one of the others would have known something."

"That boy Jupiter is their leader. What he doesn't know, his friends won't know either."

"How can you be so sure?" asked Helena angrily.

"It's true," Gus interjected, but she ignored him.

"What did this Jupiter know?"

"Rhandur gave the three of them a business card at that time. It had the address of his motel on it."

Anger welled up in Jupiter. Rhandur? No son would refer to his father by his surname. So it had all been lies and lies. Jupiter had believed Vikram and had even felt sorry for him!

"Which motel?" asked Helena.

"The Seven Pines Motel in Hollywood."

"I assume you were there."

"No. It's too late in the evening. I would only have made myself suspicious."

Helena looked at Vikram disparagingly. "It was a mistake to send you on this mission."

"You think you would have been better suited? Would the boy also have believed you that Rhandur is your father? Would he have told you everything he knew immediately?"

Vikram still spoke slowly and deliberately, but the mockery in his voice was unmistakable.

"Gabriel won't be thrilled," Helena continued unapologetically. "He wants results! He wants to know where the Fiery Eye is! I'll go to the motel myself tomorrow."

Vikram just nodded. "Can we go on board now?"

Helena made a welcoming gesture, but there was no friendliness in it.

Gus, who had stood by silently until now, finally asked: "What about me?"

“You come with us,” Helena said firmly.

“You said you’d let me go if—”

“If your little excursion leads to success,” Helena interrupted him, “but that was not the case.”

“What else am I supposed to do?” asked Gus angrily. “I don’t know where the Fiery Eye is! I don’t know where Mr Rhandur is either! I—”

“Sh-sh-shh...” Helena uttered, as if trying to calm a four-year-old who had just scraped his knees. Then she repeated her inviting gesture. “Bruce!” she called over her shoulder. “I’m undoing the lines, we’re casting off!”

A tall, strong man, whom Jupiter had not noticed before, stepped out of the shadow of the deck structure. Helena took care of the lines and was distracted for a moment.

Suddenly Gus whirled around and ran down the jetty, but Vikram was swift as a panther. He sprinted after the English boy. Just at the fishing boat in whose shadow Jupiter was hiding, Vikram got hold of Gus’s arm. Vikram, who was not a bit out of breath, twisted Gus’s arm behind his back and roughly pushed him back. The English boy groaned in pain.

“Don’t do that,” Vikram said in a matter-of-fact manner. “You know what happens if you don’t co-operate.”

Gus’s resistance died out as quickly as it had flared up.

Jupiter’s heart was racing! The two were only two metres away from him. By then, Helena and the hulking man called Bruce were already approaching. The opportunity had passed.

“Everything under control, Vikram?” asked Helena mockingly.

Vikram led Gus away without a word.

Gus turned his head, perhaps to see if anyone was there who might have taken notice of the commotion. That was not the case.

This time, Jupiter took his chance. He peeked out from behind his hiding place. Gus widened his eyes and opened his mouth, but Jupiter quickly put his finger to his lips and shook his head. Gus remained silent. Quick-witted, he turned his head forward again before the others noticed anything.

“In you go!” Helena ordered him when they reached the end of the jetty and Gus climbed onto the yacht. Helena and Vikram followed.

Once on board, Vikram put on a woolly hat. Then he started the engine. Bruce pushed the hull away from the jetty with momentum and jumped aboard at the last moment.

Jupe thought feverishly. He could call the Coast Guard, but he didn’t have a phone.

What about the night watchman? By the time he showed up here, the *Raider* would have long since disappeared into fog and darkness. After that, no one would be able to track the yacht down—neither the night watchman nor the Coast Guard nor anyone else.

There was no time to go for help. Jupiter had to do something... and he had to do it now!

4. Dive into the Deep End

The *Raider* slowly picked up speed. It pulled something behind it on a long rope. It was a small dinghy.

It was madness, but the only possibility!

Jupiter left his cover and ran. Bruce, who had been supervising the casting off from the railing, had just turned around. Jupiter took off his backpack and quickly scribbled a question mark on the wooden platform. Then he took a deep breath and dived headfirst into the water. Icy cold and darkness enveloped him. His clothes immediately soaked up water and slowed him down so much that it felt like he was diving through honey. Moreover, salt water went under his bandage and was burning his wound.

The dinghy glided over his head in the yellow backlight of the harbour lamps. The First Investigator struggled against the undertow that was pulling him down. Fortunately, he managed to quickly reach his right hand out of the water and got a grip on the rear edge of the dinghy. A jolt went through his body as he was pulled along. He raised his head above the surface of the water and took a deep breath.

Had anyone noticed him? No, it didn't look like it.

Now the *Raider* was clearly picking up speed. Jupiter had to hold on with both hands. He looked back. The marina disappeared in the fog—first the illuminated car park, then the jetty with the boats, and finally, the yellow lanterns also faded.

Jupiter had to climb into the dinghy before the *Raider* got too fast! With all his strength he pulled himself up. His wet clothes tugged at him. However, he managed to push his arms through and let his upper body plop forward into the interior of the dinghy. He exerted all his strength and managed to crawl all the way in.

Since the dinghy was in the dark, Bruce, who was at the helm, could not see Juve. The First Investigator relaxed a little—and instantly began to freeze. It was very cold out in the open water especially when he was completely soaked. Fortunately, he found a rolled-up blanket under the bench.

Jupiter took off the clothes that were sticking to his skin. He left the bandage on as a precaution. Shivering, he wrapped himself with the blanket and waited until the warmth slowly returned to his body.

Slowly he calmed down. He had made it! But the relief was soon displaced by a gnawing fear. He had no idea where the journey was going—to Mexico, perhaps... or to Canada. He would freeze to death on the way!

Even if he got past that, there would be trouble if the journey stretched till the next morning. As soon as the sun rose, those in the yacht would see him, and then what? What if they threw him overboard? He was already too far from the coast to be able to swim back. What was he thinking? Reacting so impulsively was not really his style. Promptly, he found himself in a mess.

It was not often that the First Investigator felt panicky. This time he had to pull himself together to keep a cool head. Fear did not help him, he knew that. On the contrary, it could be his downfall!

Jupe concentrated. If he wasn't mistaken, they weren't going along the coast, but out to sea. There weren't too many possible destinations out there. Actually, only the offshore islands came into question. Most of them were uninhabited nature reserves. Brooding and ready for anything, Jupiter pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders.

A short time later, the fog lifted a little and Jupiter saw a glaring finger of light gliding across the sky every few seconds.

It was the beacon of a lighthouse! ... And the *Raider* was moving towards it.

Soon the yacht slowed down. Jupiter hurried to put his clothes back on. They were still dripping wet, of course, but at least the inner cold had gone from his body. Carefully, Jupiter stowed the blanket back in its place.

The *Raider* went even slower until the engine was switched off and only the sound of the sea could be heard. The dinghy drifted slowly past the yacht until the rope tied to the front first turned it and finally brought it to a halt. Luckily for Jupiter, the dinghy was still in the shadow of the yacht.

They had reached the island with the lighthouse. Wet black rocks rose out of the water. A flurry of activity broke out on board the *Raider*, as the swell pushed the yacht dangerously close to the rocks a few times.

Jupe saw a small, ugly concrete jetty between the rocks, and there was a motorboat there. After Helena and Bruce had moored the *Raider* with their combined forces, Helena called out: "Take care of the dinghy, Vikram, otherwise it will hit the rocks!"

Jupiter's heart leapt. The connecting rope tightened! As quietly as possible, he rolled over the edge of the dinghy and let himself slide back into the icy water. On his back he swam away from the yacht. The waves were uncomfortably high. Nearby they were crashing against sharp-edged rocks.

Meanwhile, Vikram had secured the dinghy. Thanks to the darkness, he could not see Jupe in the water. Then together with Helena and Gus, Vikram got onto the concrete jetty.

"See you later," said Bruce, who remained on board the yacht.

The footbridge led between the rocks to a small path that went steeply uphill. The three made their way up. Soon Jupiter could no longer see them.

The First Investigator was a good swimmer. Nevertheless, his strength was fading. The water pulled and tugged at him and the waves brought him threateningly close to the sharp rocks again and again. He had to get onto that jetty!

With the last of his strength, he pulled himself up the concrete structure and ducked behind a nearby rock.

Powerless, the First Investigator sank to his knees while the salt water ran out of his clothes. He was suddenly exhausted to death, and would have preferred to remain where he was. However, he could not lose sight of the three of them. He took a couple of deep breaths, then braced himself and began to climb up the path as well. Even though it was dark there, he looked back at the jetty a few times to make sure that Bruce did not see him.

The path led up a steep slope. At the top was the lighthouse. The signal beacon drew its steady circles of bright light. For a brief moment, Jupiter saw the outlines of Helena, Vikram and Gus a distance ahead of him.

Jupe quietly made his way up the arduous path, and more than once he stepped on wobbly stones in the darkness and almost fell. At least he felt warm as he climbed. Soon he had stopped shivering.

He reached the upper end of the slope. Here the fog was less dense and a pale silver moon gave a little light. Up close, the lighthouse looked much smaller. It was only about three storeys high.

The island was a small, sparsely overgrown plateau that suddenly broke off at the edges and plunged into the depths. Not far from the abyss stood another building. Its silhouette looked like a fortress... or the ruins of a fortress. One window was lit up. Gus and his two guards walked towards it.

5. The Pirate Base

The First Investigator stayed under cover until the trio reached the fortress. A rectangle of light appeared as a door opened with a loud creak. The three figures entered the building and the door closed.

Jupiter crept towards the fortress and saw more and more details. The building nestled against the rocks as if it had grown together with them. The walls of grey stone seemed to be very old. A small tower with a broken top rose into the sky as an extension of the break-off edge. A scaffold stood on one side.

He was on Santa Clarita Island!

On the tiny island stood the remains of an old Spanish fortress. Later it had been a pirate base. Supposedly there were even secret passages through which the pirates could escape in emergencies back then. Jupiter had heard that the fortress was to be opened to visitors in the near future. Now, this was officially not yet possible due to the dilapidated condition of the walls.

The door through which the three had entered the fortress was made of dark ancient wood with rusty metal fittings. With the creaking sound it had made, Jupiter didn't dare open it. So he walked along the outer wall, looking for another entrance. The windows were all too high to see through, and they were also barred. The scaffolding was a possibility, but Jupiter first wanted to make sure that there was no better way than climbing to a dizzying height.

When he had gone three quarters of the way around the building, the wall came very close to the cliff edge. From here, the shimmering lights of the mainland could be seen across the carpet of mist.

He carefully looked over the edge and saw that the cliff went down into the churning, foaming depths. There wasn't even a bay or a jetty down there. He could see only a breakneck path leading down, and it was even steeper than the one he had just come over.

Cautiously, by putting one foot in front of the other, Jupiter walked along the wall across the narrow strip of ground. At that moment, the moon disappeared behind the fortress. Now he could see almost nothing and with every step, he feared falling into the depths. His right hand reached into the void while he felt along the stone wall with his left, but suddenly his fingers slid over rough wood!

It was a door!

It was similarly robust as the other one, except that the salty spray had eaten away at the wood and metal even more. This was perhaps one of the secret pirate entrances!

Jupiter pushed down the handle. The door opened, but it creaked and groaned terribly. The sound echoed inside the fortress like in a cathedral. Jupiter paused and listened, but he heard neither excited shouting nor pounding footsteps. After four or five breaths, he squeezed through the door, and then carefully closed it.

He found himself in a dark tunnel. It was only a little wider than his shoulders and was so low that Jupe had to lower his head. After a few steps, his left hand reached into the void. With his hands and feet, he felt a spiral staircase leading upwards.

After two turns, he heard voices. Jupiter crept up until he stood in front of another wooden door made of a few rough-hewn boards. It was ajar such that it rattled again and

again in a light breeze. The bluish-white light of an LED lamp fell through the gap. The First Investigator knelt down and peered through. Behind the door was a small room. He saw three people sitting on folding chairs at a camping table, and he could make out that they were Helena, Vikram and Gus. Vikram was talking.

“... There is nothing from him. He knew nothing about Rhandur and nothing about the Fiery Eye.”

A man with a deep, pleasant voice answered over a loudspeaker. “You disappoint me.”

“However, there is a lead,” Helena said, “but Vikram didn’t follow it.”

“What lead?”

Vikram told the stranger about the Seven Pines Motel.

“I will go there tomorrow and ask about Rhandur,” Helena said immediately. “If I were Vikram, I would have done it immediately.”

“This late at night?” the stranger asked pointedly. “Vikram did well to decide against it. He’s in charge when I’m not around. You haven’t forgotten that, have you, Helena?”

“No...” Helena mumbled.

“Good. How’s the surveillance?”

“There are no problems,” Helena said. “Fog rolled in around nine o’clock, though. It has only just lifted. Charles seems to be asleep, everything is dark there.”

“The surveillance has been going on long enough,” Vikram added. “We are ready. The mission will proceed as planned tomorrow night when Charles is at his poker game.”

“I am relying on you, Vikram. Soon the Silver Hand will be ours... and we will also find the Fiery Eye.”

“What about the boy?” asked Helena.

“Lock him in the dungeon. That will be enough for today.”

“What? No!” cried Gus angrily. “You said you’d let me go!”

“If I have the Fiery Eye—yes,” the voice said.

“That was not the deal!”

“I don’t remember us having one.”

“You said you’d let me go!”

“Take him away,” said the stranger. “We’ll talk later.”

“Yes, sir,” Vikram said, ending the conversation. Then he turned to Gus. “Are you coming willingly?”

“No,” Gus said defiantly, but then added: “I have to go—to the toilet—urgently.”

Helena laughed softly. “If you think you can run away... forget it. We’ll go with you. Then you won’t get any ideas.”

The First Investigator watched through the gap in the door as all three left the room into a corridor. Slowly their footsteps faded away. The First Investigator waited about half a minute to be sure. Then he slowly pushed open the door. Fortunately, it did not make a sound.

At the window was a tripod with a large, very expensive-looking telescope. It was pointed at the mainland. Jupiter peered through the lens and was amazed, for he had not expected such a high magnification. He was looking at a modern white mansion standing on a rocky bluff on the coast. Beyond the windows, everything was dark. Only some lights on the terrace shimmered. If he wasn’t mistaken, that was the Malibu coast. So the people here were using this room to observe the mansion!

Then Juve focussed his attention around the room. In one corner lay some metal dishes and a small gas cooker. There was a pile of books on the table. Jupiter took a quick look at them. They were tattered paperback editions of an adventure series Jupiter knew from old

book collections at the salvage yard. The uppermost book was *John Mercury and the Mystery of the Pyramids*.

However, there was another book on the desk—an open notebook. The heading read ‘Charles’. Someone had neatly entered dates and times of the last few days. Next to it were notes like: ‘Left house’, ‘Returned’, ‘On terrace with friends’, ‘Went to sleep’. It was not difficult to interpret the notes. Charles was obviously the man who lived in the mansion at Malibu Beach.

Carefully, Jupiter turned a few pages. Pasted into the book were newspaper clippings, photocopies from books and printouts of e-mails. The First Investigator’s eyes widened when he realized what he was looking at.

6. Escape from the Fortress

Jupiter had only needed a few minutes for these pages. Grasping information quickly was one of his great talents. When he was focussed, he could remember everything he had read once. However, he did not have the time to go down to every detail, but the contents of the notebook had been more than revealing.

The First Investigator's heart beat faster... but before he could think further about his discovery, he heard voices from outside: "That way... off to your cell!" It was Helena.

Gus growled angrily something unintelligible.

Jupiter had to hide. As he turned back the pages of the notebook, a loose piece of paper, a photocopy of a book page, fell out. He folded it up without hesitation and pocketed it for later reading.

The next moment, he crept out of the door from where he came in. He left the door in the same ajar position to hear what was going on.

Shortly afterwards, a door creaked. The First Investigator listened. He then realized that Helena and Vikram led their protesting prisoner somewhere else as they did not come back into the observation room.

After a while of silence, Jupe opened the door again, but this time he crept out of the observation room into the corridor through which the three had gone out earlier. On both sides, there were openings into other rooms, but their doors had long since gone. Also, large parts of the walls had crumbled. On the floor, moss and grasses grew in the cracks between the stone slabs. Moonlight fell through some holes on the outer wall.

The corridor ended at a dilapidated stone staircase. Jupe heard footsteps on the upper floor, so he crept up the steps. There he saw another similar corridor. The ceiling had holes through which one could see the night sky. At the end of this corridor, Vikram, Helena and Gus stood in front of a heavy door. Jupiter ducked down.

Vikram pushed Gus ungently through the door and Helena threw it shut. She secured the door with a heavy padbolt and fed a padlock through the loop but without letting it snap shut. Then the two of them turned back.

Jupe hurried back down the stairs and hid in one of the half-ruined rooms behind a remnant of the wall. There he waited until the two had passed his hiding place. When he was sure they were in the observation room and wouldn't be returning any time soon, he decided to go free Gus. However, when he was about to sneak out, his eyes fell on a metal transport box in a corner. The lid was open, and he could see that the box was full of food!

Jupiter's stomach spoke up like an awakening predator. All at once, he realized how exhausted and thirsty he was. Dried pasta, rice, canned tomatoes, olive oil... nothing he could eat just like that. Then he found a box of muesli bars! Relieved, he stuffed a few bars into the wet pocket of his shirt, tucked a bottle of water under his arm, and following a spontaneous idea, he also took a bottle of olive oil. Then he hurried back up the stairs and on to Gus's prison cell.

At the door, he poured a little oil on the rusty hinges and the latch and spread it with his hands. Then he took off the padlock, pulled back the bolt and silently opened the door.

In the corner of a bare room with a barred window, Gus sat on a mattress lying on the floor. He had his arms wrapped around his knees and was staring gloomily at the wall. When he saw Jupiter, he raised his head, snapped his eyes open and gasped so loudly that Jupiter quickly put his finger to his lips.

“Don’t you start shouting!”

“Jupiter!” gasped Gus. “How did you... how did you manage to get here from the harbour—”

“In principle, I have no objection to enlightening you on the details of my arrival, but given our inferior position, we should postpone this until a later date.”

Gus jumped up. “But how did you get here? Are you alone? Where are we anyway? We have to be careful! Vikram—he is still here somewhere! He and that woman, Helena!”

“We are on Santa Clarita Island,” Jupe said, “not much more than a big rock in the sea. We can talk about the rest later. Now let’s get out of here.”

Gus nodded.

Together they left the cell and hurried back to the stairs. Gus took the lead and quietly, they made their way to the main exit. There too, Jupiter used the olive oil to stop the door from squeaking. Then they stepped outside.

The cold night wind immediately made Jupiter shiver again. They walked briskly to the lighthouse and from there down towards the jetty. They had almost reached there when Jupiter suddenly stopped.

“Damn!” He took cover behind a rock.

“What is it?” asked Gus in alarm.

The First Investigator pointed to the *Raider* and the other motorboat bobbing up and down on the waves not thirty metres away from them. On board, the lights had just come on and Bruce climbed out of the interior of the yacht onto the deck, where he was busily handling a rope.

“What now?”

“We wait. There’s nothing else we can do. If Bruce should go ashore, we’ll hide in that crevice up ahead and wait until he’s gone past us.”

Jupe tried to open the water bottle, but his hands were too slippery from the oil. Gus had to help him. Jupiter greedily drank the bottle half empty before passing it on. After that, he went for half of the muesli bars.

“Do you think we’re safe here?” asked Gus doubtfully as he crouched behind a nearby rock.

“No,” Jupiter admitted bluntly, “but at least from here we have a view of the yacht.”

“How did you find me?”

“I followed you.” Jupiter told him about the tracking device, the motorbike and him hiding in the dinghy.

Gus’s eyes widened. “That was incredibly dangerous!”

“You scratched ‘HELP!’ onto my notepad. What was I supposed to do?”

“I put you in danger,” Gus said guiltily. “That’s exactly what I wanted to avoid. Vikram shouldn’t have found you in the first place! I—”

“Gus,” Jupe said quietly. “You don’t have to apologize. I realize that this Vikram has been pressuring you. I also know that he’s not the son of Rama Sidri Rhandur. In fact, I know these people.”

“You know them?”

“Well, not directly. I know the group they belong to. It’s called Sphinx—a secret organization of archaeologists who don’t take law and order too seriously and like to plunder

ancient excavation sites on their own.”

Gus frowned. “Wasn’t that the organization you were dealing with back on the Island of Death?”

Jupiter nodded. “The very one.” The Island of Death case had caused quite a stir, which was why Gus had also heard about it in far-off England.

“How do you know that, Jupiter?”

“Because—” Jupiter interrupted himself. The First Investigator had read it in the notebook in the observation room just now, but he figured that until they were safe, it might not be wise to let Gus in on it. That might put the English boy in unnecessary danger.

Jupe waved it off. “That’s not important now. Sphinx is networked worldwide and apparently well-organized. How did you fall into their clutches? What do these people want from you?”

“They want the Fiery Eye, and a silver hand. I don’t even know what that hand is. They are criminals, Jupiter! But I didn’t know that when they contacted me.”

“Tell me from the beginning,” the First Investigator asked.

Gus nodded and glanced over at the *Raider*. Then he took a deep breath. “Two weeks ago, a man called me from here, California. He wanted to talk to me about my great-uncle Horatio. The man claimed that he was an old friend and introduced himself as Gabriel White.”

7. S.O.S.

Gus told Jupiter how he had accepted Mr White's invitation and flown to Los Angeles.

"My plane landed this morning. It seems like ages ago! Vikram met me at the airport. He had a sign in his hand with my name on it and introduced himself as Mr White's assistant. He was there with the van and we drove to... uh... what was it called? Westlake Village. Vikram gave me the creeps right away."

"Why?" Jupiter asked.

Gus shrugged his shoulders. "I can't put my finger on it. He was so serious, and he prepared me for the meeting with Mr White as if it was for a job interview—in particular, I would be asked about the Fiery Eye. Anyway, I didn't tell him much because I didn't like him. However, White himself was then totally nice and cordial. He showed me his big house and seemed genuinely pleased to see me—the great-nephew of his old friend Horatio. Immediately he wanted to know all sorts of things—about my life in London, my studies... he seemed so sympathetic!" Gus shook himself involuntarily.

"We ate together outside on his terrace. Then White started telling stories about my great-uncle—how they travelled around the world back then, what adventures they had, and so on. I told him about our adventure—about the inheritance and the Fiery Eye. White was very interested in that. He wanted to know every detail.

"Finally, Mr White came to talk about Mr Rhandur. He asked me if I knew where Rhandur had gone to. He also asked about you, and about a man named Hank Cooper. He had a lot of questions! It all seemed strange to me, but since White had invited me here, I didn't want to be rude.

"I had to go to the toilet at some point. Besides, I wanted to call my father to tell him that I had arrived safely. So I excused myself and went into the house, but I forgot my mobile phone on the table and turned back. I was almost at the terrace door when I heard White say: 'The boy doesn't know anything.' What alarmed me was the way he said it! His voice was suddenly very different. It was immediately clear to me that he had been fooling me all along. So I stayed hidden behind the door and eavesdropped on the two of them. Then they were talking about you, Jupiter! 'Maybe we should check out those three boys who found the Fiery Eye back then,' Vikram said. 'They might know more,' ... and then they talked about a burglary."

Jupiter thought of the notebook. "Has that anything to do with a person called Charles?"

"How do you know that?" asked Gus in surprise.

Jupiter waved it off. "Later. Go on!"

"They talked about how they were going to manipulate an alarm system to get into this Charles's house, and that they were going to steal something from there—a hand sculpture made of silver. I then understood that perfectly. I was invited to California by a gang of criminals! I wanted to leave immediately and turned around, but I must have made some sound as Vikram suddenly pushed the door open. I flinched and he knew immediately that I had heard them talking. 'That was a mistake, boy,' he said."

Gus broke off, because suddenly a soft ringing sound reached them. It came from the *Raider*. They looked over the rock behind which they had taken cover. Bruce was answering

a phone call. His deep bass voice carried far enough for them to hear what he was saying.

“What do you mean broke out? Where was he locked up anyway? ... No, I didn’t see anyone. He couldn’t have gone far... I’m coming. He won’t get away with these boats, I’ll make sure of that... See you in a minute!” He hung up.

Gus ducked his head. “Jupiter! What now?”

“We have to get out of here,” Jupiter whispered. “We can forget about the hiding place in the crevice. If Bruce is looking for us, he’ll find us there too. Quick, let’s get back up the slope while he’s still busy with the boats!”

Under cover of darkness, they climbed the path leading to the lighthouse for the second time. Jupiter tried hard to keep up with Gus, and he was completely exhausted when he reached the top.

“How about we get to the other side of the island,” Gus suggested. “Maybe there’s someone who can help us!”

Jupe shook his head. “Santa Clarita Island is uninhabited. There’s not even—”

“Jupiter, over there!” Gus interrupted him.

The beam of a flashlight danced back and forth outside the walls of the fortress. Someone was looking for them—and walking right in their direction!

Jupiter suddenly saw the situation very clearly.

“They’ll get us,” he muttered, “as soon as they shine some light over here. There is no way to hide here. We can’t escape either. This island is really small.”

“So what do we do now?”

“The lighthouse,” said Jupiter. “We can get help from there!”

The door to the lighthouse was on the other side. When Jupiter put his hand on the handle, he didn’t have much hope, but to his surprise it wasn’t locked.

“Upstairs!” said Jupiter. “There might be a telephone or a radio there.”

They hurried up the spiral staircase into a circular chamber where there was a table and two chairs... but nothing else.

“Where is the radio equipment?” asked Gus.

“Maybe upstairs.” Jupiter pointed to a narrow wooden staircase. He climbed up, and found that it was the lantern room. The beacon was in the middle and was so bright that he had to shield his eyes against it. The mechanism that turned the light constantly hummed next to his ears. There was nothing else there.

Frustrated, he returned down. “Wrong. Damn! I was so sure! We’d go before they get the idea of looking for us here.”

“Too late,” Gus said, looking out the window.

Vikram had just met up with Bruce, who had come up the path from the jetty. They looked towards the lighthouse... and started moving.

Gus reached for a chair. “Quick, Jupiter! Grab one too!”

Jupe suspected what Gus was up to. Together they brought the two chairs down the spiral staircase as fast as they could.

The entrance door had no latch from the inside. The lighthouse was so small and narrow that there was hardly any space between the door and the first step. Gus simply wedged the chair in between. He did the same with the second one, which Jupiter handed him from above. “Two is better.”

Someone pushed down the handle.

“Locked,” Bruce said.

“The lighthouse is not locked and the key is in the fortress,” Vikram said. “Also, there is no latch on the inside. The boy has barricaded himself in there!”

Now the door was rattled.

“Open up!” Bruce boomed, pounding against the door such that it trembled.

“Quick, upstairs!” Jupiter whispered and started to retreat.

“What are we going to do?” asked Gus when they were out of earshot. “We’re trapped!”

“We are, but we can try to get help.”

“But there is no radio!”

“No, there is a beacon.”

Jupiter climbed back into the lantern room and tried to make sense of the technology and mechanics of the beacon. The light from the ultra-bright lamp was sent outside via a mirror through the glass panes that surrounded the room. At the base of the rotating unit, Jupiter found a control element that essentially consisted of a manageable row of switches.

The First Investigator tried the first one. The beacon went out. It could be switched on again just as easily. Jupiter quickly figured out how to stop the turntable on which the mirror was mounted without extinguishing the beacon.

He stopped the turntable when the light beam was pointed at the mainland. Then he turned the light off and on again... off and on again... off and on again...

“Jupiter, what are you doing?” asked Gus from below.

“I’m sending an SOS signal—with Morse code. Three times short, three times long, three times short. With luck, someone will notice and send help. How long will the door hold?”

At that moment, as if in response, there was such a loud crash that Jupiter had the feeling the whole tower was shaking.

“Not for much longer, I’m afraid,” Gus murmured.

The First Investigator continued to concentrate on the distress signal. It was a desperate act, he knew that himself, but did he have a choice?

“Jupiter!” shouted Gus. “Come quickly! I have an idea!”

Jupiter couldn’t imagine what kind of idea that was, but he let go of the switch and went back down to Gus.

“There’s a window midway down the stairs,” Gus said excitedly. “We can climb out while they are trying to get in! We can even make it to the yacht!”

They stumbled down the spiral staircase to the window. It was on the side facing away from the door. Just below them, the voices of Bruce and Vikram could now be heard more clearly. Apparently they had knocked a hole in the door, but they were not yet inside.

“Get ready for a beating, you brat!” roared Bruce angrily. “It’s over!”

“Not quite yet,” Gus murmured. He looked determined to do anything. “Come on, Jupiter, you first!”

“No, you.”

But Gus shook his head. “I’m taller and a bit more athletic than you. I can climb down fine by myself, it’s not that far down. It would be better for you to hold on to me and I’ll let you down as far as I can.”

No time for discussion. Juve awkwardly squeezed through the opening feet first and finally hung like a wet piece of laundry in the window, chest and arms inside, the rest outside.

“Give me your hands, I’ll put you down!” Gus whispered.

Jupiter did it and realized the mistake at the same moment. His hands were still slippery from the oil. His fingers slipped out of Gus’s grip like wet fish.

“Jupiter!”

The last thing the First Investigator saw was Gus’s eyes widening in terror. Then he plunged into the depths!

8. In the Dungeon

Monday, 15 September

Something rustled. Uncle Titus was probably in the shower. Then Jupiter would have to get up soon, but he was so tired. He was so infinitely tired, and his muscles ached. Maybe he was getting sick. He couldn't even open his eyes. He let it go and fell asleep again.

The next time he woke up, a few minutes later, or maybe a few hours, something was still rustling. It wasn't the shower. It sounded different. Was it the coffee machine in the kitchen?

"I really need to get up slowly!" Jupe muttered to himself.

It wasn't the coffee machine either. It sounded more rhythmic—an up and down motion... like... like...

Waves!

A surge of adrenaline flooded his body and Jupiter was so abruptly wide awake that it almost hurt. He opened his eyes. Golden morning light shone in streaks on the stone floor of a cell. He himself lay on an old, hard mattress.

Groaning, Jupiter straightened up. Against the opposite wall, he saw Gus asleep, curled up on the floor, and wrapped in several blankets. In one corner were some water bottles. Jupiter reached for one and drank greedily. Then he looked at his watch—it was a quarter to nine.

He stretched carefully. His whole body ached and he had to stretch his muscles like an old man before he could even stand up. He didn't seem to have seriously injured himself in the fall from the lighthouse. He only had a bruise on his hip. It hurt, but it should pass. His clothes were almost dry, only the leg bandage still felt a bit clammy.

He went to the heavy wooden door with the iron fittings and shook it. It was locked from outside, of course. The window had bars and just outside was the scaffolding he had seen earlier.

Jupe looked out the window. A short distance away was the cliff edge and beyond that, the glittering sea. It was quite smooth that morning. On a few offshore rocks, three seals dozed in the sun while a seagull pecked at shells. If he pressed his forehead against the bars, he could also see the *Raider* on the left. A few tankers and cargo ships slid across the horizon. It was such a peaceful picture that Jupiter forgot the terrible truth for a brief moment.

He was a prisoner!

He shook the bars one by one. None moved.

Gus was still fast asleep. Jupe did not want to wake him so he sat on the mattress and thought about the events of the previous night.

Everything had gone wrong, but what should he have done differently? Abandon Gus? Not even give chase on the motorbike? Let the *Raider* leave without having achieved anything? No. The only thing he was really annoyed about was his mobile phone that he left behind at Headquarters.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, realization hit him—nobody knows where he was! Bob and Pete had no idea. Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus had no idea. They must have noticed by now that he had disappeared. What would they have done? What were they doing right now?

He thought of the argument the previous evening, which had been so completely stupid and childish. Did Aunt Mathilda now think his disappearance had something to do with it? Guilt pierced his stomach.

Something stirred on the floor. Gus groaned and moved. He opened his eyes. Only for a second did his narrow face look peaceful. Then the panic returned.

“Jupiter!” he gasped and straightened up, startled.

“It’s all right, Gus.”

It only took Gus a moment to see that this was not true. “I must have fallen asleep,” he muttered in confusion. “You passed out from the fall. Then they locked us in here. I wanted to stay awake, but—”

“You were just as exhausted as I was,” Jupiter said, handing him the water. “Here, drink this.”

Now that Gus was awake, Jupiter rattled the door, but the wood was thick, and the fittings were bombproof.

“Forget it, Jupiter, I already tried that yesterday. We’re not getting out of here.” He hung his head. “I didn’t want to put you in danger, you have to believe me! White made me bring Vikram to you so that the fairy tale about his missing father would be more believable. I wanted him to believe that your headquarters no longer existed so he wouldn’t find you, and White wouldn’t get his hands on you as well.”

Then Jupiter saw the light. “That’s why you were on the wrong side of the salvage yard! You wanted to keep him away from our trailer!”

Gus nodded. “With a bit of luck, he would have bought it from me and we wouldn’t have met at all.”

“The plan didn’t work because I heard you and went outside. Why didn’t you just say something yesterday? Why did you just secretly carve the call for help into my notepad? Was Vikram armed? Were you afraid he would hurt you?”

Gus shook his head. “Not me, but my father. White threatened that something bad would happen to my father if I didn’t do what he asked. He repeated that very clearly last night after our attempted escape. ‘One more game like that and it’s your father’s turn,’ he said.”

Jupe frowned. “Your father is in England after all!”

“White says he has contacts all over the world!”

“It sounds like an empty threat to me.”

“But you said yourself that these Sphinx guys have their people everywhere!” Gus reminded him.

“Yes, but by that I mean archaeologists and treasure hunters, not murderers! Sphinx isn’t a world conspiracy, Gus. They are basically just a group of grave robbers. I hardly think it’s in Mr White’s power to carry out his threats. As an investigator, if there’s one thing I’ve learned about bad guys, it’s this—they like to act like they’re in control, like they can make the rules, but most of the time, it’s just hot air.”

Gus thought about it for a moment, but then shook his head decisively. “White will only release us if we do what he says!”

“Didn’t he promise that before? Last night? He was going to release you, but he didn’t. I can tell you why—you overheard them and know too much about their plans. That’s why they won’t let you go at least until after the break-in. You could give them away to the police right away.”

“All the more important that we do what Mr White asks,” Gus insisted, “for the time being, anyway... Maybe there will be a chance to escape. Until then, I don’t want to risk anything.”

The First Investigator felt anger bubbling up inside him that Gus had allowed himself to be intimidated by baseless threats like that! But then Jupiter called himself inwardly to order. Gus was not the bad guy.

The First Investigator had not yet met this Mr White, but he already despised him.

Jupiter crouched down in front of Gus, trying to ignore the aching bruise on his hip. "Listen to me carefully, Gus—if you play by the rules Mr White sets, you've already lost. You have to fight back!"

Gus looked at him in despair. "I can't! White has me in the palm of his hand!"

Jupiter sighed and pushed himself up again.

"What are you going to do?" Gus asked.

"White doesn't have me in his hands. I'll show these people I'm not afraid of them," Jupiter said, banging on the door. "Hello! Hey!"

He kicked the wood such that the door shook on its hinges. Outside everything remained silent, as if the fortress were deserted. Frustrated, he turned away and looked around the room. Maybe he could find some kind of tools. Apart from the plastic water bottles, there was nothing.

Suddenly he heard the hum of an engine.

Jupiter went to the window. "There!" A fast boat was heading straight for Santa Clarita Island.

Gus pushed himself next to him. "Who could that be?"

Jupiter recognized it by the white-orange colour of the hull. He could hardly believe it. "The Coast Guard! It's the Coast Guard, Gus!"

"Really? But... but are they looking for us?"

"The reason for their presence is beyond me, but I don't care as long as they just keep heading here!"

The two boys watched spellbound as the patrol boat slowed down.

"Hey!" cried Gus. "Hey!"

"Gus, save your voice. They can't hear us while the engine is still running. As soon as it's quiet outside—"

Suddenly, they heard footsteps scuffling along the corridor outside. There was clacking and scraping at the door. Someone took the padlock off and slid the bolt!

Jupe realized a second too late. He ran to the door to brace himself against it, but by then it flew open and Vikram rushed in.

The young Indian was fast and strong. He grabbed the First Investigator and twisted his arm behind his back. Jupiter's cry of pain was stifled by a piece of cloth that Vikram stuffed into his mouth.

"Don't fight back!" Vikram murmured in his ear. It didn't sound like an order, but like well-intentioned advice. Jupiter's resistance flagged and the pain in his arm subsided. The handkerchief in his mouth tasted strangely of sandalwood.

Jupiter squinted over at Gus. He stood in the corner and did not move.

"You shut up," Vikram said quietly. "You know what happens if you don't."

Gus nodded silently. He was stiff as a board.

Jupiter could not believe it. Together they should be able to overpower Vikram! But the fear of White's threat paralysed Gus. Even Jupiter's penetrating gaze did nothing to change that. On the contrary, Gus turned his head to avoid looking Jupiter in the eye.

A seagull cried in the distance and voices came through the window. A man and a woman were talking to each other as they came closer.

"Does anyone live here?"

“No,” the woman replied, “but there are people from the California Heritage Institute here and they are taking care of the fortress. It is supposed to be opened to visitors at some point. During that time, these people are also running the lighthouse, at least that’s what our records say. The person in charge is a certain Mr... Wait, I wrote it down—”

“Can I help you?”

The voice was deep and friendly. Jupiter had only heard it over the loudspeaker so far, but he recognized it immediately.

“Oh, good afternoon! Are you Mr... White?”

“That’s me, what can I do for you?”

“Officer Simon and Officer Clarke from the Coast Guard. We received several reports last night. Various boats and residents of the coast have observed that the lighthouse here—”

“Oh, I know,” Mr White interrupted the officer. “The beacon wasn’t functioning as what it was supposed to, was it? I apologize so much. It was my fault. There was a technical fault—a power failure. There was something wrong with the generators that power the island. Some of the contacts must be corroded because of the salty air. When the power came back, the beacon had some trouble. It stopped turning.”

“It stopped spinning and blinking,” Officer Simon said.

“Yes, I noticed that too,” White confirmed, “only for a few minutes, though. After that it worked fine again.”

It was astounding. White told the lie so convincingly that even Jupiter almost believed it.

“I am really sorry. I know that I have a responsibility with the operation of the lighthouse, but it was a technical fault. I hope you didn’t come out here to see me specifically for that. You could have called me.”

“That’s what we would have done if only the beacon had gone out,” Officer Clarke replied. Her voice sounded cool. She was not so easily taken in by White’s charm. “—But it didn’t go out. It was blinking.”

“Like I said, it was—”

“—And it’s in the rhythm of an SOS signal.” Officer Clarke interrupted White.

“Really? It was very rhythmic, I noticed that, yes. The fact that it translated into SOS, of all things, escaped me. I was too busy trying to fix the malfunction, you see.”

“Mr White, would you mind if we took a look inside the lighthouse?”

“No, of course not,” White replied. “I’ll be happy to accompany you.”

Jupiter wanted to scream, but Vikram covered his mouth in addition to the gag.

The First Investigator feverishly wondered if they had left any tell-tale traces in the lighthouse, but apart from the broken door, he could think of nothing. For that, White would surely conjure up a convincing explanation out of his hat.

Then Officer Clarke added: “And after that, we’ll take a look at the fortress as well.”

9. The Silver Hand

The voices moved away. Jupiter's mind raced. They will find us! But what would Vikram do then? Apparently, the young Indian didn't know that either. He was frozen. The First Investigator did not even hear him breathe.

Eventually Vikram said: "Come with me!" He pulled Jupiter rudely to the door and out into the corridor. Gus followed them like an obedient dog.

Vikram pushed Jupiter towards the staircase and down the steps. His grip was relentless. They made their way across the observation room to the rough-hewn door. Vikram opened it and led them down the spiral staircase. It descended into darkness. The First Investigator felt his way cautiously. At the bottom, Vikram directed him along a pitch-dark corridor until his foot hit something like a wall. He groaned.

"Shut up!" said Vikram.

Something scraped and scratched. It sounded as if Vikram was tampering with something on the rock face.

Suddenly an opening appeared in the wall. Juve and Gus was led through it into a room where a little daylight fell through a narrow embrasure. Juve figured out why Vikram had brought them here—to keep the Coast Guard officers from finding them.

The secret room was only slightly bigger than the observation room. It was empty except for a small table covered with papers. On it, like a paperweight, lay a life-size hand sculpture glowing in silver!

In the dim light, the sculpture shimmered mysteriously. It looked like a real hand, only smoother and more even. The fingers were long, narrow and positioned in a stylized, symbolic gesture. Jupiter recognized this as a *mudra* hand position used in some Asian religions, rituals and dance.

This sculpture had to be the Silver Hand that Vikram had spoken about and that had been mentioned in the notebook. Jupiter was confused. Wasn't it this very sculpture that the gang wanted to steal from this man called Charles? But why was it already here? The burglary was supposed to take place tonight!

He no longer had time to think about this mystery, as he heard echoing footsteps approaching.

"Not a sound!" murmured Vikram. "Or else your friend Gus will have a bad time!"

Jupiter squinted at Gus, who looked like a ghost in the dim light. Even if the First Investigator had wanted to, he couldn't even manage a grunt. The gag was drying out his mouth and seemed to be getting more disgusting by the minute, and Vikram's grip was still iron tight.

Voices approached from outside.

"Are there any lights down here?" asked Officer Clarke.

"I'm afraid not."

"I have a flashlight with me," Officer Simon said.

"What's that? A second exit?" Officer Clarke asked.

"A secret passage of the pirates," White said. "That's how they could escape in an emergency."

“And which way does it lead to?”

“Nowhere. The corridor ends at a wall.”

“I’d like to see that for myself.”

The footsteps came closer until they stopped just at the secret door.

“Why does the corridor end so suddenly?” asked Officer Clarke.

White laughed. “You’ll have to ask the pirates. We suspect that a larger tunnel system was planned but never implemented.”

“Hmm... fine. Okay, we’re done with this,” Officer Clarke said. “Sorry to disturb you, Mr White, but we had to follow up on the SOS signal.”

“Of course. I fully understand that.”

“I’ll be honest with you,” Officer Clarke continued, “I find it hard to believe that a beacon malfunctioned and sent off SOS signals of all things.”

“Well, I agree with you, Officer Clarke,” White said. “I also don’t think the lighthouse was sending distress signals. Rather, I think it was flashing steadily. However, SOS is certainly the best-known Morse code in the world. Is it not often the case that we do not see what is really there, but only what we expect to see?”

There was no response from the Coast Guard officers.

“May I accompany you as far as your boat, officers?” White continued. Then the voices faded away.

Jupiter could have made some noise to get attention, but even now he could not dare to do anything. Vikram would make good on his threat and hurt Gus, he was almost certain of that. Helplessly he looked around. Wasn’t there something he could do without putting Gus in danger?

His gaze fell on the Silver Hand again. Suddenly, he understood what he was looking at. He recalled what White had just said to the two Coast Guard officers: ‘Is it not often the case that we do not see what is really there, but only what we expect to see?’

Vikram waited until the engine of the patrol boat started outside. Then he said: “You can take out the gag,” and let go of Jupiter’s arms.

Jupiter pulled the disgusting thing out of his mouth. His tongue felt immobile. Now his arms were all the more flexible.

Suddenly, the First Investigator leapt forward, grabbed the Silver Hand, rushed to the embrasure and held the sculpture out. “Stop or I’ll throw this thing into the sea!”

Vikram paused in mid-motion.

“Two steps back!” Jupiter ordered.

“I’m warning you, Jupiter! If you—”

“Shut up and back off, Vikram! Now I’m talking!”

Gus stared at Juve in horror. That wasn’t much of a help.

“Apparently you are not aware of the consequences of your actions, Vikram,” Jupiter said angrily. “You will get yourself into big trouble if you do not release us immediately!”

Vikram shook his head slowly. “Drop the Silver Hand and you are in big trouble.”

“We’ll see whose troubles are bigger,” Jupiter said, stretching his arm a little further out.

But Vikram did not seem impressed. “What do you want to do? You don’t have a plan.”

Unfortunately, he was right about that, but Jupiter wouldn’t tell him that.

He invented his plan as he talked. “You open the door now and go back into the corridor and up the stairs.”

“What then?”

“You’ll see.”

Vikram hesitated, but then did as Jupiter asked and opened the door.

A man was standing in the corridor. In the dim light, Jupiter could only make out that he was tall and slim and wearing a dark suit.

“Vikram! What... what’s going on?”

“There’s trouble, sir, the boy wants to throw the Silver Hand into the sea.”

“Please, Mr White, I had nothing to do with it, you must believe me!” Gus looked as if he wanted to throw himself at the man’s feet at any moment. Jupiter would have liked to slap him.

It took Mr White only a moment to grasp the situation. His shoulders relaxed and he entered the room.

Now Jupiter saw his face. It was narrow and bearded. The greying hair was neatly trimmed, the eyebrows full and dark. He looked distinguished, like a European nobleman.

White smiled kindly. “I think there’s been a terrible misunderstanding here. You are Jupiter Jones, aren’t you?”

“Not another step, Mr White, or your precious sculpture will end up in the Pacific.”

“Tsk, ts, ts...” White muttered. “It seems to me that you feel cornered, my boy. There’s no need for that at all. Tell me what’s on your mind and we’ll talk about it.”

Jupiter laughed out. “Believe me, Mr White, the conversation you want to have with me will not happen. Let Gus and me go right now or the Hand will fly into the sea!”

“Of course I’ll let you go!” asserted White in all friendliness. “I’m not going to keep you here against your will! Do I look like an unreasonable person? And as for the Hand—it’s not that important to me. Throw it into the sea or not, it doesn’t matter to me.”

Jupiter laughed out again. “Are you serious? I don’t believe a word you say.”

White shrugged his shoulders. “—But it’s the truth.”

Jupiter decided that it wouldn’t hurt to shock this slick Mr White a little. “So let me get this right... it doesn’t matter to you if I consign this far-too-light imitation, which is certainly not made of silver, to eternal depths? A bold claim, Mr White, and implausible at that. After all, you intend to exchange this fake for the real Silver Hand at Charles’s tonight, so that he won’t notice the theft.”

White’s facial features briefly slipped. He quickly got himself under control again, but Jupiter saw that he had hit the mark.

“I don’t know what you think you’re dealing with here, Jupiter, but I assure you—”

“Whatever you want to assure me, Mr White, save it. If you don’t leave this room within five seconds, I will verify the truth of your statement that you don’t care what happens to your Silver Hand.”

White raised his hands soothingly. “All right, Jupiter. Come, Vikram, let us bow to the boy’s wishes.” Sure enough, the two withdrew.

“Go up the stairs!” shouted Jupiter. When he could no longer see the men, he said to Gus: “Keep them at bay!”

“But Jupiter! How am I supposed to—”

“Just make sure they don’t overpower me when I go past the staircase. Go on, Gus!” Jupiter urged.

Gus nodded and entered the corridor. “You’d better go up a few more steps, Mr White,” he said, trying hard not to let his voice tremble.

Jupiter pulled his arm back through the embrasure and hurried after Gus. As he passed the staircase, he glanced briefly at White, who had obediently climbed so far up that Jupiter could only see his shoes. There was no sign of Vikram at all. Jupiter suspected that the Indian boy would try to cut them off outside. Nevertheless he had to take the chance.

“Follow me, and lower your head,” Jupiter told Gus and immediately went into the pitch-dark narrow tunnel. He felt his way for several steps until he reached the pirate exit. Then he pushed open the door and called out to Gus: “Come on, Gus! Quick!”

Holding on to the Silver Hand, the First Investigator crept along the narrow strip of ground between the stone wall and the abyss, while Gus followed him.

“Oh, it’s so far down!” he heard Gus say behind him.

“Just don’t look down!” advised Jupiter.

“What are you going to do?”

“It’s simple. We’re leaving!”

Jupiter had expected Vikram to be lying in wait for them at the end of the path, but the young Indian was nowhere to be seen.

Once they got to safer ground, they began to run—away from the fortress, past the lighthouse, to the path that led down to the jetty. When coming down the path, Gus was the first to notice. “Jupiter! The boats!”

Jupiter looked into the bay. The smaller motorboat was nowhere to be seen. The *Raider*, in turn, was just pulling away from the jetty. Jupiter recognized Bruce’s massive figure at the helm.

“Goodness! They warned Bruce over the phone!”

“How are we going to escape now?”

“Not at all,” said a voice behind them. Grinning, Vikram came out from behind the lighthouse.

On the other side, the door to the fortress swung open and Gabriel White stepped calmly towards them. In the bright sunlight, Jupiter saw that he was older than he had suspected earlier. Deep lines marked his face, but his posture was bolt upright, his gaze alert and clear.

“That was a nice little performance,” White said, clapping his hands. “—But let’s stop the game and talk to each other like reasonable people.”

“Stay where you are!” Jupe shouted.

“I’m afraid you’ve lost your leverage, Jupiter,” White said, coming ever closer.

“I’ll throw this Silver Hand in the water.”

“Hardly possible,” Vikram now said behind him. “You are too far from the cliff.”

Vikram moved to cut the First Investigator from the edge of the cliff and then closed in.

Suddenly Jupiter saw everything crystal clear—his escape attempt had failed. He had already let slip what he knew about White’s plans to steal the real Silver Hand. He knew his full name, knew that White worked for the California Heritage Institute. He knew far too much about him, which was why White wouldn’t let him go—possibly never!

Jupiter was at a loss... but he could still throw a spanner in the works.

“Let’s talk about everything,” White suggested and held out his hand. Whether he wanted to grasp the First Investigator’s hand or take the sculpture from him was not clear... but it didn’t matter either.

Jupiter whirled around and ran towards Vikram. He saw the surprise in the Indian boy’s bronze-coloured eyes. Vikram spread his arms to stop him, but Jupiter had no intention of running past him. The First Investigator stopped suddenly, held onto the sculpture with both hands, and turned sideways. Then he made a quick and full anticlockwise turn of his body, winding up like that for a hammer throw, before flinging the sculpture towards the cliff edge!

Vikram threw up his arms. The human and the metal fingers touched briefly, but he could not get a grip on it. In a whirl, the Silver Hand flew over the cliff edge and was gone.

Jupiter heard it smash twice against rocks before landing in the water deep below with a splash!

10. The Legend of the Maharaja

“Jupiter!” cried Gus, startled. The First Investigator could not share the fear that was written all over Gus’s face. He felt only satisfaction.

“What have you done?” roared White. His calm and friendliness were totally gone. Now he was beside himself with rage. “You stupid fat boy!”

Jupiter allowed himself a superior smile. “Well, what now, Mr White?”

White clenched his hands into fists. His breathing was heavy and for a moment, Jupiter thought he was going to come at him, but then he merely growled: “Vikram, get them back to the cell! Go!”

Vikram glared at Mr White and pushed his hair deep into his forehead. Then he grabbed Jupiter by the shoulder and led him back into the fortress. Gus obediently followed, with White behind him. No one spoke a word. Only when they were standing in front of the door to their prison cell did Vikram say: “Get in there!”

Gus was about to enter the cell when White held him back by the arm. “Not you!”

Hope flickered in Gus’s gaze. “You’re letting me go?”

White laughed out. “I’ll put you somewhere else. Together you’ll only get stupid ideas. Luckily we have plenty of rooms with doors here.”

“No!” Gus protested, and there was angry resistance in his voice. “I don’t want to be locked up again! I want to get out of here!”

“Do as I say and you will be home in a few days,” White promised. “If not... my people in England will have to pay your father a visit.”

Gus shook with anger and helplessness. “You won’t get away with this!” he called out.

“Oh, I think so,” White said with a smile.

“We know who you are!” shouted Gus. “And we know what you’re up to! You belong to Sphinx!”

The smile on White’s face faded. “What... how—”

Jupe gave Gus a warning look—not another word!

“How do you know about Sphinx?” asked White threateningly.

Gus remained silent.

White put one and one together and now looked at Jupiter. “How do you know about Sphinx?” he asked the First Investigator. “From where?”

Jupiter said nothing.

“You will tell me...” White was convinced. “Not now, but you will. Count on it.”

He gave Jupiter a shove, sending him stumbling backwards into his prison cell. The door flew shut, the bolt was pushed forward, the padlock rattled.

“And you’re coming with me!” said White outside, and footsteps moved away in the corridor.

Jupiter listened until he heard nothing more. Angrily, he let his fists crash once against the wood.

A few minutes passed. Then suddenly White’s angry voice echoed through the fortress. Apparently he had locked Gus in another room by now and was now taking on Vikram.

“How does that fat boy know about Sphinx? How could he throw the Silver Hand into the sea? Do you realize how much time and money it cost me to make that fake?”

Vikram’s answer was too soft to be heard clearly, but White continued roaring: “How did he even know about the Silver Hand? I thought he had no idea when you were with him last night! You said he was surprised! Are you too stupid to realize that that nosy brat was playing with you, Vikram?”

Again, Vikram’s reply was inaudible and White also slowly calmed down and became quieter. Jupiter could no longer hear what he was saying, but that much he had heard was revealing.

White apparently believed that Jupiter was some kind of spy. The First Investigator had to figure out how to take advantage of it... else it could be his undoing.

However, Jupiter was still determined to run away. The escape had failed because he had not had time to develop a plan. Now he had all the time in the world. Somehow he had to get out of here. Break out of a prison cell should be an easy exercise for him. He was, after all, First Investigator Jupiter Jones.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t think of anything.

He began to pinch his lower lip with his thumb and forefinger as he paced up and down in his cell. Again and again he went to the window, looked outside and brooded to himself.

The scaffolding was in place in front of the window. Jupiter reached through the bars and inspected the steel poles and the metal platforms that made up the scaffolding structure. A lot could be done with this, but the scaffolding components were firmly in place.

He needed tools... but there were not even coil springs in the mattress. It was made of foam.

—Or he screamed so loudly for help that the ships and boats out there heard him... but they were all far too far away.

—Or he scraped stones out of the wall with a teaspoon until he could take out the bars and escape down the scaffolding... but he didn’t have a teaspoon.

—Or he could push a long hook under the door and use it to release the bolt from the outside... but he had no hook.

—Or he could send smoke signals through the window... but he didn’t even have a match.

All he had at his disposal were a few bottles of water, a smelly mattress, his clothes on his body and the view out of the window. For the life of him, he did not know how to free himself with that. As the sun climbed into the blue sky, reached its zenith and disappeared from his view above the fortress, the bitter truth slowly seeped in.

He was trapped—as trapped as one could be. He would remain so unless someone freed him, but that might not happen because no one knew where he was.

Panic seized him, but Jupiter pushed it back with all his might. He had to keep a clear head! He sat down on the mattress. A piece of paper rustled in his trouser pocket. Jupiter frowned and pulled it out. It was the photocopy he had taken from the notebook last night. He had forgotten all about it. Curious, he unfolded it and read the text:

There are many stories about Maharaja Rajendra Sinha of northern India. It is certain that he was in power for forty years before one day fleeing his community and becoming a follower of Dhaarmikwar. A legend tells how this came about.

Throughout his life, the maharaja was eager to increase his wealth and accumulate more and more treasures. One day, he came into possession of the Fiery Eye—a legendary ruby that was said to have brought bad luck to each of its owners. Rajendra

Sinha feared the curse, but his desire to possess the gem was greater. However, only a few days after acquiring it from a merchant, the maharaja fell ill.

Rajendra Sinha was so influential that he could get the best doctors in the region to come to him, but no one was able to help him. The maharaja was desperate and deeply regretted his greed for he was sure that it was the curse of the ruby that had befallen him. He began to question his life so far and realized that the pursuit of wealth had always been the most important thing to him. He wanted to make amends and immersed himself in meditation.

Unexpectedly, Dhaarmikwar, the god of justice, appeared to him. The god, who is worshipped by a small religious sect in the remote mountain village of Pleshiwar, explained to the maharaja that the Fiery Eye would only cause mischief in the hands of humans. As a token of repentance, he should surrender the stone to him, Dhaarmikwar, at the Temple of Justice. In return, Dhaarmikwar would cure him of his illness.

Rajendra Sinha did as he was told and was indeed cured. He then turned away from his people and community and became a Servant of Justice, as the Dhaarmikwar devotees call themselves. He parted with all his treasures and sacrificed not only the Fiery Eye but all his wealth to the deity.

The Fiery Eye had a special role in this—it was inserted into the forehead of the statue of the god in the Temple of Justice as a third eye. From then on, it lit up when a criminal approached it. The Fiery Eye was said to be able to unerringly separate right from wrong.

Most of this story is probably in the realm of legend. However, the fact is that the maharaja's departure from his former position intensified the conflict between the two communities. His people felt cheated of Sinha's wealth, which he should have used for the benefit of his community instead of sacrificing them to Dhaarmikwar. A radical group, the Shikaaree, formed and took it upon themselves to reclaim the treasure. The Shikaaree succeeded in driving the Servants of Justice largely out of Pleshiwar into the surrounding mountains. However, they never found the maharaja's treasure.

Today, it is indeed questionable whether the Servants of Justice still exist at all. Their mountain temple seems to have disappeared. It may have been destroyed in an earthquake, which is not uncommon in this area.

It is possible that the Temple of Justice was a legend from the beginning. For at this point, it should be emphasized once again that legend and reality are often difficult to separate in India. It remains a land of myths and mysteries.

After he had read the text, Jupiter continued to look at the article for a long time.
The Fiery Eye...

Slowly he got to the bottom of the things he had stumbled into so surprisingly.

Gabriel White seemed to want to try what the Shikaaree had never succeeded in doing—finding the treasure of Maharaja Rajendra Sinha!

11. The Most Important Thing in the World

Some time in the afternoon, footsteps approached from outside. The bolt was pulled away and the door opened. Vikram came in. "Mr White wants to see you."

'Then he should come here,' was on the tip of Jupiter's tongue, but then he reconsidered. The better he got to know this fortress, the sooner he might get out of here.

He rose from the mattress, followed Vikram down the staircase and then into the observation room which was situated directly below his cell. Gabriel White was standing at the window next to the telescope. He turned around when Jupiter entered. A plate of fresh pancakes was steaming on the table, next to it were a few bananas, a cheese sandwich and a pot that smelled deliciously of coffee.

Jupe's mouth watered and he couldn't stop his stomach from rumbling. It had been a day since he had last eaten anything decent, apart from the muesli bars. He had no intention of showing the slightest bit of weakness so he stopped in the middle of the room, folded his arms and didn't even look at the table.

Gabriel White had observed all this very closely and smiled amusedly. "How nice that you are able to come. After the heated tempers have calmed down a bit, maybe it's time you and I had a talk."

"Whatever you say..." Jupe replied.

"Jupiter Jones," White continued. "The name struck me as familiar right away, but it took me a moment to realize why—the Island of Death."

"So your cronies from Sphinx told you about me."

Gabriel White laughed in amusement. "Cronies! What a glorious word. It sounds so much like gangsters and the underworld."

"Then it fits," Jupiter said seriously.

"Tsk, ts, ts! We're really not gangsters! Gangsters break into cars and steal old ladies' handbags."

"You steal valuable cultural treasures—"

"—Which no longer belong to anyone," White quickly interrupted the First Investigator. "You misjudge Sphinx, Jupiter. We're not in it for the money. It's about discovering secrets and unearthing treasures that have been forgotten for hundreds of years. We are adventurers, Jupiter! Isn't that what drives you? Puzzles and mysteries? Isn't that what you and your friends are all about? You see, I've been reading up on you. You're a successful and clever investigator. The Morse code last night was clever!" White nodded at him appreciatively.

"Yes, very clever," Jupiter replied. "Unfortunately, it didn't have the desired effect. Let me and Gus go, Mr White!"

"I will... but not now. You'll have to be patient for a while."

"—Until you have carried out your planned burglary?"

"You really know a lot."

"Gus told me what he overheard at your house."

"Yes, it was very unseemly of young Mr August to eavesdrop on his host. Still, probably just a silly coincidence. I don't believe in coincidences with you, though."

"I don't know what you mean."

“You knew very well about the Silver Hand this morning, about the break-in at Charles’s, and you knew we belonged to Sphinx.” White’s smile vanished. “Makes me wonder what else you know, and most importantly... how.”

‘From your notebook, you idiot,’ but Jupiter refrained from telling him that.

White continued: “I’m afraid your friend Gus couldn’t tell me, I’ve already spoken to him.”

So it had been a correct decision for Jupiter not to tell Gus about the notebook.

“I have complete faith in Gus and believe him. So now I address some questions to you: What do you know about the Silver Hand? What do you know about the Fiery Eye? Where did Rama Sidri Rhandur disappear to that time? And I advise you not to insult me with silence this time.”

“Everything I know, I told your lackey Vikram yesterday,” Jupiter claimed.

White laughed. “You mean the address of the motel? It’s not much.”

“Sorry.”

“And the Silver Hand?”

“Vikram himself mentioned it when he was with me and at that time, I believed that he was Rhandur’s son.”

“How do you know about Charles?”

“I don’t know anything. I merely picked up the name when I overheard your people at the marina last night.” Jupiter lied. He actually first heard of the name when he was hiding behind the rough-hewn door, eavesdropping on Helena and Vikram conversing in the observation room.

White looked at Vikram questioningly.

Vikram said: “It is possible that we talked about Charles. I don’t remember exactly. However, we definitely didn’t talk about Sphinx!”

“So?” Gabriel White asked slyly, eyeing Jupiter sharply.

“That you belong to Sphinx was merely a conjecture I expressed to Gus. You said yourself that I was a clever investigator.”

White shook his head slowly. “You see, Jupiter, at this point I’m afraid I don’t believe you.”

“I am extremely sorry about that.”

“For all you know, I would imagine that you even know the whereabouts of the Fiery Eye.”

“Till yesterday, I thought it was at the Temple of Justice in Pleshiwar.”

“I found out that it never got there,” White said, “but you already know that, don’t you? What else do you know? Won’t you let me in on your secrets?”

“I have none.”

White fixed his eyes on the First Investigator. “I would have liked you to be more cooperative... but that may yet change.” Suddenly he pulled a mobile phone out of the inside pocket of his jacket and called someone.

“Helena? ... Are you in Rocky Beach yet? ... Good. I’m extending your mission. I don’t just want to know what’s going on at the salvage yard. I want you to find out everything you can about our young guest’s family—who he’s close to... who he cares about... Do you understand me? I want to know who or what is the most important thing in the world to him.”

Gabriel White hung up and turned back to Juve. He pointed to the richly laid table. “I suddenly have a very big appetite. What about you?”

The First Investigator had turned pale, but he nodded. “I’m starving.”

White shrugged regretfully. “Too bad!” He gave Vikram a wave. The next moment, Jupiter was led out of the room.

The smell of pancakes followed the First Investigator down the corridor. The stench of White’s unspoken threat, however, was stronger.

Suddenly Jupiter knew how Gus had felt all along. White had threatened to harm his father. The difference was that Jupiter’s family was not relatively safe in faraway England. They were only a short distance away in Rocky Beach. Then he recalled the exact words White said: ‘I want to know who or what is the most important thing in the world to him.’

Jupiter’s stomach clenched like a fist. Was it the worry about his family? Or just his hunger that was slowly driving him mad? He traced the feeling and realized that it was neither one nor the other.

It was anger.

12. Alone in the Dungeon

They reached his cell door.

“Get in!” ordered Vikram.

Jupiter didn’t think twice as he grabbed the padlock that was dangling loosely in the loop of the padbolt. He hurled it out the window across the cell. It bounced off one of the scaffolding poles—and beyond.

Triumphantly, he turned to Vikram. “Now what? How are you going to lock me up?”

Vikram’s eyes narrowed angrily. “Like this!” He gave Jupiter a rude shove and threw the door shut. The bolt squeaked shut.

The First Investigator felt incredibly stupid. Of course, the padbolt secured the door perfectly well even without a padlock. As long as no one on the outside tried to free him, Vikram didn’t need a padlock.

Angrily, he kicked the door, but he was beginning to lack the strength even for that. If he didn’t get something to eat soon, he wouldn’t even be able to get up.

Jupe dragged himself to the mattress. Luckily there was still enough water. It didn’t fill him up, but at least it quenched his thirst.

Then he thought about the conversation he just had. White believed that Jupiter knew more than he was admitting. If he confessed to reading the notebook, White would never let him go. If he concealed it from him, White would continue to believe that Jupiter was hiding something from him.

He was in a quandary.

For the rest of the day, no one showed up. Jupiter sometimes heard distant voices somewhere within the fortress, but they were too soft to be heard clearly.

In the early evening, the motorboat returned. Shortly afterwards he heard Helena’s voice in the observation room below. She was talking to Gabriel White. Maybe one of them was looking through the telescope, but they were close enough to the window for Jupiter to catch a few sentences.

“... Missing... his aunt has called the police... I don’t have his friends—”

“... No longer matters. Tonight—”

“... Sure that we really will complete the mission... Silver Hand... Charles will immediately notice what was stolen and—”

“... Don’t lose any time. Autumn begins in one week—”

“... It could be a trap. Vikram could be—”

“Are you going to start that again!” White had become louder.

Helena also spoke up: “I don’t know how you can trust him, Gabriel! A boy from India, barely grown up, just joined Sphinx, and you allow him in this important mission! We know nothing about him!”

“Enough of this!” thundered Gabriel White. “For the last time, Helena, I put Vikram on this team! I know enough about him! Are you going to question my decision? I trust him! And that means you will trust him too. Do you understand me?”

Helena’s answer, in turn, was so meek that Jupiter could not hear it. After that, the conversation was over.

After the sun had set, the coast began to glow like a band of stars. Countless windows in countless houses set small points of light on the horizon. On the Pacific Coast Highway, the traffic moved like a luminous ant trail. The First Investigator could even make out the white mansion the telescope had been pointed at.

It had been dark for about an hour when Jupe decided to go to sleep. He wasn't really tired, but his body still demanded rest. As he lay on the mattress, his mind was wide awake.

It was the second night that he was not at home. Aunt Mathilda would go crazy with worry by now at the latest, and Uncle Titus would become ever more silent in his despair. Jupiter would have given anything to at least be able to signal to them that he was all right. He stroked the now dirty bandage on his leg that Aunt Mathilda had insisted on.

"I'm fine!" he thought, and immediately had to smile at himself. He didn't believe in telepathy. Nevertheless, he sent home the best thoughts he could muster.

Bob and Pete, on the other hand, would not just sit at home and wait—he knew that. They were looking for him!

But how could they find him? He had left almost no traces. Maybe someone would find his abandoned motorbike... or the chalk question marks. Apart from that, no one could deduce where he was.

Voices from outside made him sit up and take notice. He got up and went to the window. The beam of three flashlights danced across the path leading to the jetty. It was Helena, Bruce and Vikram. Jupiter watched as the three boarded the *Raider*.

Shortly, the yacht cast off. The bright hull still shimmered through the darkness for a short time, but very quickly only the red and green navigation lights could be seen. The *Raider* was heading for the coast—towards the white mansion.

Just before it arrived, a bank of fog crept in over the sea and enveloped Santa Clarita Island in no time. The coast disappeared into the humid air. Now all that could be seen was the lighthouse's beam of light turning steadily.

"Damn," he heard a muffled voice below him. It was Gabriel White. He had probably watched the *Raider* just as Jupiter had, only through the telescope, but that was no longer of any use to him in the fog.

After about forty-five minutes, the *Raider* returned. Judging by the boisterous voices, the mission had been a success. Later, Jupiter even heard a champagne cork pop somewhere in the fortress.

Gradually it became quieter and Jupiter lay down again. He had only just fallen asleep when a soft clacking sound woke him up. It came from outside—from the scaffolding. Suddenly he was wide awake again.

Someone was there! Gus? Or Bob and Pete? Had they found him and come to free him?

Jupe jumped up. He grabbed the window bars with both hands and stared into the night.

Nothing—only the wind, and that made some loose part on the scaffolding rattle.

The disappointment that welled up in Jupiter was so strong that he even had to fight back tears. He was surprised at himself. Was his situation really so hopeless that a destroyed glimmer of hope already brought him to the brink of despair? Had he perhaps not yet really understood how serious the situation was?

This thought was so disturbing that it troubled him for a long time. The scaffolding did the rest to keep him awake.

Clack, clack, clack.

It rattled half the night.

13. Clack, Clack, Clack

Tuesday, 16 September

The next morning, Gabriel White and Vikram came to his cell. Vikram had a wicker basket in his hand. Its contents were covered with a checked cloth, but it smelled delicious. Jupiter almost laughed. It looked as if Aunt Mathilda had packed a picnic basket and had it delivered to him here.

“Did you sleep well?” White asked politely.

“Are you serious? It was cold. The mattress stinks, and the scaffolding rattles.” The scaffolding was still rattling now, as the wind had barely died down in the morning.

“Then you’ve had plenty of time to think,” White surmised.

Jupiter nodded. “Sure I did.”

“Well?”

“I have come to the conclusion that you are a ruthless criminal.”

White smiled.

“Do you find this amusing?” Jupe asked.

“Yes, indeed. Up to now I have been nice and polite to you. Believe me, Jupiter, you have never seen me being ruthless... and I won’t have to be, if I get the answers to my questions.”

“And what would your questions be?”

“Let’s stop this game,” White said. “It’s beginning to bore me. Just give me the answers I want and you can go home.”

“I already gave the answers to you yesterday.”

“Where is the Fiery Eye?”

“I don’t know.”

“And what about this?” White held out the tattered adventure novel Jupiter had found in the observation room two nights ago—*John Mercury and the Mystery of the Pyramids* by Hank Cooper. “What does this tell you?”

Jupiter frowned uncomprehendingly. “Nothing at all.”

White’s smile faded. “You know, my patience will eventually run out.”

“Mine too,” Jupe said. “Are you going to give me something to eat or not? This game is getting tiring.”

“So it is... I should treat myself to something different. Maybe take a trip sometime... to Rocky Beach—to that famous salvage yard! Unfortunately, it’s closed at the moment... for family reasons. Your aunt and uncle don’t seem to be able to keep the business going. The poor people can’t stop worrying about you, but your aunt Mathilda is a lovely person, Helena says. She even poured her heart out to her. How scared she is for you when you’re out at night hunting criminals or stumbling through old mine shafts looking for treasure and getting hurt.” He pointed to Jupiter’s bandage. “—And, of course, you growing up with them because your parents passed away early. I imagine it would be great to grow up in a salvage yard—as a child among all the junk... that must have been paradise, wasn’t it? But also dangerous. How quickly a mountain of scrap metal can slide and hurt someone. How quickly

something can catch fire and suddenly the whole place is in flames—and with it, the adjacent house where these dear people live!”

Jupiter’s self-control melted away and he clenched his fists. “Leave my aunt and uncle out of it!”

“Oh, don’t worry! They’re not part of the game... not yet,” White said, “but whether it stays that way or not is entirely up to you.”

“I’m telling you for the last time, Mr White, I can’t answer your questions because I don’t know anything! And the fact that you’re threatening me doesn’t change anything.”

White’s eyes flashed with amusement. “Let me assure you, Jupiter, a threat from me is very different. I’ll give you a little more time to think it over, but not too much longer.” With that, White and Vikram left the room and bolted the door.

Jupe still had his fists tightened. His teeth were clenched so tightly that his jaw hurt. He would have liked to scream, but he didn’t want to give himself that embarrassment. It had taken a lot of strength for him to show composure towards White, but in the end he was close to losing his temper. His mental strength was slowly draining away and that scared him. What could he do against White when his willpower was weakening?

The scaffolding rattled.

Clack, clack, clack.

He had to concentrate! And he couldn’t let White scare him. How could he get out of here? Of course, he had thought about just telling White some fairy tale about the Fiery Eye. White would then check the story immediately and find that it was a lie.

Clack, clack, clack.

The First Investigator was bursting at the seams. He stormed to the window and grabbed the bars. “Stop that rattling, you damned thing!” he shouted, and now he didn’t care at all whether White heard him or not.

The tears he had been holding back last night welled up in his eyes. Good thing Pete and Bob didn’t see that! On the other hand... if they were here, he would pull himself together. Pete might go crazy, but certainly not him, Jupiter Jones. He would be the one to keep a cool head and think of something sooner or later.

Why couldn’t he do that now? Was he someone else entirely without Pete and Bob by his side? Did he need Pete’s panic and Bob’s hesitation around him to have brilliant ideas?

Clutching his hands around the bars, he stared out to sea and imagined his friends were here.

‘We’ll never get out of here, Jupe! This is the end!’

‘I don’t know, Jupe, Pete might be right...’

Slowly, the veil before his eyes disappeared.

Clack, clack, clack.

The nerve-racking rattling snapped Jupiter out of his daydream. Finally, he saw what was causing this noise! A small silver metal thing was dangling back and forth at the flat end of a scaffolding cross brace. Stupidly, it was a bit too far away so Jupiter couldn’t reach it with his hand to silence it. He took a closer look at the thing—and then realized what it really was.

A padlock! Not just any padlock, but the one he had thrown out of the window yesterday! Somehow, it had not fallen into the depths, but the open shackle had clung on to the cross brace.

Jupe was electrified. A wealth of possibilities rushed through his head. A padlock! He could lock people in with it, or lock them out, or chain objects. He didn’t have a concrete plan, but an open padlock seemed just as valuable to him as a life preserver on the open sea.

He needed that thing!

14. A Tool... or a Weapon

Jupiter stretched his hand as far as he could through the window bars but he was still a forearm's length away from the padlock.

He looked around. It was maddening, but he didn't even have something as simple as a cord. Lost in thought, he scratched his leg. The skin under the bandage itched. Maybe he should...

The bandage! Why hadn't he thought of that right away! Hastily he pulled up his trouser leg and unwound the dirty bandage. The wounds underneath had long since crusted over.

Jupiter knotted a noose and threw it out the window like a fishing line, but the wind got in the way. The gauze fluttered in all directions, except where it was supposed to go. It was simply too light.

He laid the bandage out on the floor and poured water on it from one of the drinking bottles. The fabric soaked up and was now much heavier than before. Jupiter tried again. The first few throws went wide of the mark, but the First Investigator didn't let himself get flustered. He had all the time in the world.

However, he did not have to be patient for long. After only five minutes, the noose got caught in the padlock body. Carefully, Juve flicked the bandage until the padlock was detached from the cross brace and dropped onto the metal platform. The noose was still around the padlock, so Jupiter pulled it closer, and finally, he was able to grab it like a valuable piece of jewellery.

It was just an ordinary padlock from a hardware store. The shackle could be turned. Once it snapped shut, Jupiter would no longer be able to open it without a key.

The First Investigator looked at the two items he had in his hand—a padlock and a soiled bandage that was in no condition to be reused again. In any case, he folded the bandage and stuffed it in his trouser pocket.

What now?

Suddenly he felt very silly. The padlock had seemed like a salvation to him... but what was he going to do with it now? Jupiter experimented by scratching the open shackle against the bars of the window grille to see if it could at least be used as a tool, but he quickly realized that it was useless.

The steel scaffolding poles outside the window could be serious tools, but they were tightly fixed together using swivel couplers. If he had a spanner, he could—

The padlock!

He stretched his arm through the window grille and looped the shackle of the padlock around the nut of a swivel coupler. It fit almost perfectly and had only minimal play—just like a spanner that was a little too big, but could still be used. He only needed to undo one nut to release a coupler. Jupiter grasped the padlock courageously and began to turn. With a squeaky jerk, the nut came loose.

Jupiter paused, startled. If someone was in the observation room below, he would have heard that! But nothing stirred beneath him.

After a while of listening, Jupiter dared to continue. With each insertion of the shackle around the nut, he only managed a quarter turn before he had to take the shackle off and loop

it back on. He did this repeatedly, and after three minutes, he had unscrewed one nut.

Jupiter put the padlock, nut and washer on the metal scaffolding platform. Then he carefully flipped the movable part of the coupler back to release that end of the pole and allowed it to dangle freely. After that, he pulled his arm back and massaged it. The position he had to adopt to get at that one nut was not exactly comfortable, but that didn't matter now.

After a short break, he set to work on the nut at the other end of the pole. He had to be careful with this nut so that the pole wouldn't fall crashing into the depths. He turned with his left hand while holding the pole with his right.

Finally it was done. He carefully manoeuvred the pole through the window grille into his cell and weighed it in his hand. It was one and a half metres long. Jupiter gripped the pole tightly with both hands and swung it through the air like a sword.

Now he had a tool... or a weapon.

Jupe stepped up to the door. He could use the scaffolding pole as a lever to break his way out. Unfortunately, the end of the pole was too big to fit into the gap between the door and the door frame. However, the wooden components were old and parts of it had deteriorated. In any case, he had a lot of work to do.

For the first time since he had woken up in this cell, he no longer felt defenceless. On the contrary, he felt strong!

A surprised cry made him cringe.

"Gabriel! Come here! You have to see this!"

That was Helena's voice! It was from the observation room right below him! Did she hear him?

"What is it?" White sounded slightly annoyed. "Are the police still with Charles?"

"No... but someone else. I just looked, I don't know how long they've been there. Come, look through the telescope!"

"I see Charles on the terrace with two boys."

"It's the two boys from the salvage yard!"

"Are you sure?"

"I definitely recognize one of them!"

White's reply was too soft to be heard.

Jupiter stared out at the small white dot on the coast—the mansion to which the *Raider* had set out last night.

Bob and Pete! Finally!

His heart leapt. What had brought them to this mansion? Just then, energetic footsteps approached from outside. The First Investigator was just able to roll the pole under the mattress. Then he quickly sat down on the mattress just as the door flew open.

In came Gabriel White, building up threateningly in front of the First Investigator. The man was furious. His sidekick, Vikram came in behind.

"No more games," White said. "I know you're lying to me. Your two friends are up to something. You better tell me what they are doing. If you don't, you won't like the consequences."

"I suppose they are looking for me."

"How come they are at Charles's place?"

"How could I possibly know that, Mr White?"

White's attention was fully focused on Jupiter. Out of the corner of his eye, the First Investigator noticed that Vikram was distracted. The young Indian looked at the window and moved closer. He looked out and narrowed his eyes. Was he looking across to the mainland? To the white mansion? Or had he discovered that a pole was missing from the scaffolding?

Without taking his eyes off Jupiter, White called over his shoulder: “Helena!”

“Yes?” the answer echoed through the fortress.

“Tell Bruce to get the *Raider* ready to go! You’re going to Rocky Beach and find out what they’re up to!” Addressing Jupiter, he added: “Tomorrow you’ll not only have a delicious breakfast, but even the morning paper. In the local section of Rocky Beach you will then be able to read about the tragic accident that occurred at The Jones Salvage Yard... unless, of course, you change your mind. You have until sunset.”

So he had until sunset... Jupiter thought as he sat alone in his cell again. He could break down the door immediately, but he would have no chance against Vikram, Bruce, Helena and White.

The First Investigator stared intently at the mansion and racked his brains for a way to get the attention of Bob and Pete. The answer was simple—he couldn’t.

Despite White’s instruction to leave immediately, another half hour passed before anything happened. The shadow of the lighthouse was just reaching the seal rocks below when he saw Vikram, Helena and Bruce heading down to the jetty. Shortly afterwards, the *Raider* chugged away at half speed.

At that moment, White also appeared outside. He did not go to the bay, however, but to the lighthouse.

Jupe hesitated no longer and grabbed the scaffolding pole from under the mattress. He estimated where the padbolt was on the outside and began to work on the gap between the door and the door frame. With all his might, he stabbed the end of the pole at the ancient wood on either side of the gap to try to break and gouge bits and pieces of the wood out.

The noise he made did not matter as, apart from Gus, there was no one else in the fortress. He did occasionally take a look out the window in case White came back.

“Come on!” Jupiter wheezed. He rammed the pole on the wood at different angles. Slowly, parts of the wood at the gap crushed and small splinters broke out.

“Damn door! I’m stronger than you, give up now!” Jupiter’s muscles began to tremble. He was now using both hands to stab the pole on the wood. With a satisfying crunch, the hole he gouged became bigger and bigger until it punched through to the other side. He pushed the pole through the hole and tried to pry the door open. The door had not blown up like in a movie, nor had it exploded into a thousand splinters. Instead, the padbolt still held.

He continued to gouge the hole bigger and bigger until he could simply reach through it and pull back the bolt. Finally, the door swung open!

Jupiter clenched his fists in triumph.

“Goodbye, prison cell,” he muttered, “or rather, good riddance!”

He grasped the pole like a spear and left the room.

Very quickly, Jupiter managed to find the cell in which Gus was locked up. It was one floor below on the same level as the observation room, and could easily be identified by the bolted door without a lock. Jupiter opened it.

Gus stood frozen in a bare room and looked at Jupiter like a ghost.

“Jupiter—” he said in a strained voice. However, the First Investigator read no joy in his face, rather a kind of despair that he could not explain.

“Gus, are you all right?” asked Jupiter worriedly.

The boy nodded.

Jupiter was not convinced. Gus did not ask how he had managed to free himself. He didn’t ask anything, but seemed deeply disturbed, but now was not the time to ask.

“Come with me. We can talk later. For now, let’s get out of here. Vikram and the others have left the island. Only White is still here, but he has just gone to the lighthouse. The motorboat should still be in the bay. Besides, I have this.” Jupiter weighed the scaffolding pole in his hand and tried an encouraging smile.

Gus’s face remained petrified.

“Come on now!” Jupiter grabbed Gus by the arm. “We’ll take the pirate exit again,” he decided. “That way White won’t be able to see us from the lighthouse for a while.”

They crossed the observation room and descended the staircase. When they reached the bottom, a little daylight shone towards them from the right. Immediately, Jupiter headed down the pitch-dark narrow tunnel.

When he reached the pirate exit, and was about to push the door open, Gus called out: “Wait!”

“What’s wrong?” Jupiter asked as he turned around and saw that Gus had not entered the tunnel.

“I... need to talk to you.”

“Now?”

“Yes. Please, Jupiter. It’s important.”

Gus sounded so strange. He was a little outside the tunnel, peering into it. His glasses reflected the little daylight there, and a small red light shone at the level of his shirt pocket.

The First Investigator frowned. What was that?

The red glow was only faint and moved along as Gus stepped from one leg to the other. The First Investigator was about to point at it when he realized what it was—in Gus’s shirt pocket was a small electronic device with a red indicator light. Jupiter had not noticed it before because it had been too bright earlier.

That had to be a microphone!

Jupe forced himself not to focus on the little light and look Gus in the eye. “What do you want to talk to me about?”

“About something Mr White said.”

“What did Mr White say?” Jupiter heard himself ask as his brain went into overdrive.

Someone was listening in! Had Gus noticed where his gaze had wandered? No, impossible, as Jupiter was standing in the dark tunnel.

“He said you were playing a false game. You know a lot more than you’re letting on—where the Fiery Eye is, for example.”

“So that’s what he claimed?”

“Yes, he said that... he said that he would have released me long ago if you... if you—”

“If I had revealed my secrets?” Jupiter helped him.

Gus nodded.

So that was why Gus had been so strange when Jupiter freed him! White had told him what would happen because presumably Vikram had noticed the missing scaffolding pole and had seen through Jupe’s plan. The three of them had left the island, and White had gone to the lighthouse. All that was a trap!

The escape would fail unless... unless Jupe thought of something else!

“And you believed him?” he asked the English boy.

“Is it true?” asked Gus.

Jupiter took a deep breath.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, it’s true. I know more than I told White. I know where the Fiery Eye is.”

15. The Game Begins

Gus gasped. Now, his emotions seemed genuine. “You really know?”

“Yes, it’s a complicated story,” Jupe replied. “I’m sorry I put you in danger with my silence, but I... I don’t think White would really have let us go free.”

“Where is it?” asked Gus.

“The Fiery Eye? Is that so important now? We’d better get out of here first.”

“I want to know now.”

“All right. It’s in an old mercury mine.”

“In India?”

“No, here... in California—in Elizabeth Lake, it’s in a very, very safe hiding place, so safe that White would never find it even if he found out about the mine.”

“But... but why, I don’t understand—”

“Please, Gus. Now you know what you wanted to know. I didn’t tell the truth, that’s true. Maybe that was a mistake, but I’m convinced White would never have let us go. I’ll tell you the rest of the story when we’re safe. So come on now!”

Jupe pushed the door open, and walked out into the bright daylight. Gus followed. When Gus went out into the open, Jupiter noticed that the little red light faded in the sun like a dream that one could no longer remember after waking up.

Again, they made their way across the narrow strip of ground, then away from the fortress and over to the lighthouse. White was nowhere to be seen, but that didn’t mean anything. As they descended to the jetty, Jupiter pondered what had just happened.

Gus was a traitor! ... But of course he wasn’t really. White must have put him under pressure again.

‘You will wear this microphone and you will not let on,’ Jupiter imagined White’s voice in his head. ‘You will ask Jupiter about the Fiery Eye. I will be listening at all times. If I ever get the feeling that you’re tricking me... that you’re signalling to him... or if Jupiter realizes what’s going on... then your father will be in a very bad situation.’

Gus was probably enduring terrible fears. He was certainly tormented by his conscience. Jupiter felt for him.

They reached the small jetty. The motorboat was still there. No one was to be seen. Jupiter looked up the steep path to the lighthouse. Briefly, he thought he made out White behind the window in the dome of the tower. He was probably watching their every move. Gus, on the other hand, did not look up once.

With their combined strength, they pushed the motorboat into the water and jumped in. Jupiter started the engine and steered it slowly out to sea. He had to be careful. The shallows were treacherous.

Suddenly, the *Raider* shot out from behind the high rocks on the right. Jupiter was startled, although he had expected something like this to happen.

“Jupiter, look out!” shouted Gus. “They’re going to ram us!”

The First Investigator took evasive action and accelerated. Then the motorboat scraped crisply over a rock that lay just below the surface of the water and got stuck. Jupiter grabbed the oar and tried to push the boat free.

“Help me, Gus!”

Gus reached for the second oar. They got the motorboat free, but by then it was too late. The *Raider* had cut them off. On board were Vikram, Helena and Bruce.

“It’s back to the dungeon, you two!” Helena shouted, laughing.

Their escape had failed again—exactly as planned.

“An impressive performance,” White said appreciatively about twenty minutes later. Except for Helena, who had now really left for the mainland, everyone was gathered in the observation room.

Jupiter and Gus sat on uncomfortable chairs, while Gabriel White leaned casually against the edge of the table in front of them. His suit was immaculate as always. Vikram and Bruce stood rigid as statues beside the exit. “How did you manage to take apart the scaffolding pole?”

“An old trick,” Jupiter said as he felt the shape of the padlock in his trouser pocket.

“Will you tell me?”

“No.”

White shook his head. “Still as stubborn as a little child. It should be clear to you by now that you won’t succeed in escaping from this island.”

“It’s a good thing we turned back in time!” Bruce smirked in triumph.

The First Investigator laughed bitterly. “Am I supposed to believe that? That you turned back? Did you forget something? Was the stove still on?”

“How interesting...” White put his index finger to his lips. “Our young friend doubts our sincerity. What’s your theory then, Jupiter?”

“The *Raider* ambushed us,” Jupe said. “You knew we would try to escape.”

“Then why would I have let you go that far?”

“I’d like to know that too.”

“So you don’t have a theory on that?”

“No,” Jupiter lied.

White turned to Gus. “So August, aren’t you going to tell your friend?”

Gus’s eyes widened. “I... I—” he only stammered.

“All right, I’ll tell him then,” White said. He slid off the edge of the table, stepped towards Gus, reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the mini-microphone dangling from the little transmitter unit with the red light.

Jupe narrowed his eyes in mock irritation.

“You two were not alone in your failed escape,” White explained.

“He overheard us?” Jupiter looked at Gus.

“I’m sorry, Jupiter!” he said pleadingly. “He didn’t give me a choice!... My father would have been—” Gus broke off.

“It’s all right, Gus,” Jupiter said gently. “You don’t have to apologize for Mr White’s cruelty.”

White smiled amusedly.

Jupe turned to White and said: “What more do you want from me? You know everything now!”

“I know that the Fiery Eye is hidden in a mine in Elizabeth Lake. Why? How did it get there?”

Jupiter folded his arms and remained silent.

"I also know I won't find it without your help," White continued. "So you better tell me exactly where it's hidden."

"And what if I do not?"

Gabriel White started to answer, but the ringing of his mobile phone interrupted him. He pulled it out of the inside pocket of his tailored suit and glanced at the display. Frowning, he left the room. "Carol, I asked you not to call me unless it was an emergency... What did you say? ... Who's asking for a call back?" White moved away. The First Investigator could hear his voice but could no longer figure out what he was saying.

When he returned, his mood had changed. For minutes, Gabriel White was silent, staring thoughtfully out the window. Then his infamous smile returned. It looked so smug and confident of victory that Jupiter became frightened.

"Bruce, Vikram, take the boys back to their cell."

"The door in the upper room is broken," Vikram reminded.

"Then lock them together in the other one!"

"Do you think that's a good idea, boss?" asked Bruce. "Then they can talk to each other."

"It doesn't matter now," White said calmly. "Tonight Jupiter will tell me what I want to know—one way or another."

"I'm so sorry, Jupiter! I didn't mean to betray you! But White threatened—"

"It's all right," Jupiter said as he looked around. This new cell was a little darker than his previous one and there was no mattress. Here too, the window was barred. "Don't worry about it. It's not your fault."

"Yes, it is," Gus insisted. "It's all my fault! I—"

"Gus!" This time Jupiter's tone was sharper. "Blame won't do us any good now! All right? I need to think in peace."

Gus nodded and remained silent.

Jupiter only briefly toyed with the idea of letting Gus in on everything. However, the danger was too great that he would do something else stupid.

The next few hours passed without White or any of the others returning. The sun was already low when Bruce opened the door. "Come with me!" he ordered gruffly.

Gus and Jupiter got to their feet.

"Not you," Bruce said to Gus. "Just you..." He pointed at Jupiter.

"What?" cried Gus. "No! You can't lock me up again!"

Bruce did not reply, but only pushed Gus away roughly when he tried to follow Jupiter. The First Investigator nodded encouragingly at Gus.

Vikram was waiting for them outside. Gabriel White was nowhere to be seen. They walked down to the bay. The *Raider* was there, but the motorboat was gone, so Jupe presumed that White had already left the island.

"Where are you taking me?" asked Jupiter.

"You'll see," Vikram replied.

"What about Gus? He's all alone on the island!"

Bruce laughed. "Should we have called a babysitter?"

On board, Vikram put on his woolly hat and Bruce took the wheel. He steered the *Raider* towards the mainland as daylight faded.

Jupe looked back. Santa Clarita Island was slowly sinking into darkness.

"Don't think about yelling or doing anything stupid," Bruce advised as they approached the marina. "Are we clear?" He cracked the bones in his huge hands.

Jupiter nodded.

They docked and disembarked. As it was dark by now, most of the boats had already tied up and the owners had left the harbour. Only a few people were still sitting on deck and enjoying the evening peace. No one was paying attention to them.

They reached the car park and headed for the white van that Jupiter had chased two nights ago. It was no longer in the same place, so they had used it in the last few days.

Bruce pushed open the side door and made a welcoming hand gesture. "In you go!"

Jupiter climbed in. There were no seats. Instead, he sat on an overturned fruit crate. There were no windows to the outside either, only a very small one to the driver's cab. Then Bruce also came in and sat on another crate, while Vikram got behind the wheel and started the engine.

"Hang on!" Vikram shouted before driving off.

The ride was wobbly. When the van turned sharply, Jupiter had to brace himself against the walls with the flat of his hand to avoid sliding off the fruit crate. He tried to see where they were going through the small window. Bruce didn't stop him. They were going northwest along the coast.

The First Investigator had expected them to go straight to the mine in Elizabeth Lake, or maybe to the salvage yard to put pressure on him. Apparently, White had other plans.

The lights at the side of the road became brighter and more colourful, the traffic denser, until they were finally in the middle of the city.

After about ten minutes, Vikram stopped unexpectedly at the side of a busy road. As cars and motorbikes whizzed past them, the passenger door was opened. Helena got in.

"So?" asked Vikram.

"I will report to Gabriel, not to you," Helena replied coolly.

Vikram seemed to have expected nothing else. He reached for his mobile phone. "Mr White? Helena is back, sir."

A few seconds later, White's voice came out of a small box lying on the dashboard.

"Can Jupiter hear me?" he asked through the black box.

Vikram turned to look at Jupiter through the small window. The First Investigator remained silent.

"It's loud enough, yes," Vikram replied to Mr White through the mobile phone.

"Good," White's voice came out from the black box. "Listen up, Jupiter... You won't be able to talk to me because Vikram is about to hang up... but that is not necessary. It's enough for you to hear me. It's a nice little piece of technology, isn't it? It's the same one I used to listen to your conversation with young Mr August. Now you can listen to me because I'm about to have a visitor. The car is already in the car park... Ah, and he comes with reinforcements... Four of them! There are four of them! Surely not all are coming here?"

What was he talking about?

"Not all of them, thank goodness—only two," White continued. "Their guard dogs remain in the car park. Now, Jupiter, listen carefully and learn!"

It remained silent for a minute or two. Jupiter thought the radio connection had been interrupted. Then Gabriel White's voice came out of the black box again: "There you are! Right on time!"

"Good evening, sir. I'm Bob Andrews and this is Pete Crenshaw."

"Thank you for having time for us right away, Mr White..."

16. On to Elizabeth Lake!

The blood drained from Jupiter's face.

"Well, this meeting is as important to me as it is to you," he heard White say in his velvety, sympathetic voice. Jupiter could literally see him smiling. "If I had known that your friend was in trouble, I would have contacted you much earlier, of course."

The First Investigator listened spellbound to a conversation in which White calmly blurted out who he was and what position he held. Then Bob and Pete explained which tracks they had followed to find Jupiter, and what they had found out.

Inquisitively, Jupiter absorbed every little detail of the conversation. He sensed that White also listened attentively but only asked just enough questions such that his burning curiosity went unnoticed.

"Well, the Servants of Justice," Pete just said. "They probably not only stole the Silver Hand, but also attacked Mr Dwiggins and abducted Jupiter."

"We found this at Mr Dwiggins's," Bob said. "On the pendant is an image of Dhaarmikwar, the god of justice."

"Indeed..." Then there was a pause in the conversation.

"You know what's really amazing?" White continued. "I have come across this Dhaarmikwar image before—not in old books, though, and not in my research on the Temple of Justice. It is in a most unexpected place—here in California."

"Where exactly?" Bob wanted to know.

"In an old, closed mine—a mercury mine."

"Excuse me?" cried Pete. "Not the mercury mine in Elizabeth Lake?"

White played surprised. "How do you know about that?" It was clear that he put them to the test to find out if Jupiter was telling the truth!

"Because we were there only two days ago—together with Jupiter. It was the last time we were together."

"Really? Why were you there?"

"Jupiter wanted to reopen some old case he had read about. It was pretty far-fetched and also annoyed us quite a bit. Actually... wait a minute, does that mean that he wanted to go to the mine for a completely different reason? That he was looking for something completely different? ... Did Jupe lie to us?"

Jupiter listened as White raised hopes in his friends and wondered what he was aiming at, but the question was soon answered: "Meet me in Elizabeth Lake tomorrow."

"In Elizabeth Lake?" cried Pete. "Do you think Jupiter is there?"

"No. I'm sorry. Tomorrow I will explain everything to you... Can you be there in the morning?"

Pete and Bob agreed and White said goodbye to them.

Shortly after they left, White spoke again over the loudspeaker. "Well, that was an entertaining conversation, wasn't it, Jupiter? So tomorrow morning, I'll meet your friends another time. It depends on you how this meeting will go. If you have told the truth about the hiding place of the Fiery Eye, you will go free and no harm will come to them. If not..."

White left the threat unspoken.

“Helena, Vikram, you can come and pick me up now. The boys and their chaperones have left the car park.”

An electric crackle ended the connection. Vikram started the van and threaded his way into the traffic.

Jupiter realized that Bob and Pete must be very close by. The radio connection certainly didn’t have much range. Maybe they were passing each other at that very moment! However, Jupiter could do nothing—not even calling for help would have done any good at that moment.

His suspicions were confirmed. After about ten minutes, they turned into the car park of a public building with an illuminated façade. Vikram left the engine running.

Gabriel White opened the side door and climbed into the back with Bruce and Jupiter.

“Well, how did you like our little radio play?”

“An impressive performance,” Jupiter admitted grudgingly.

“Of course! I think you understood what this little demonstration was about.”

Jupiter nodded. “You have Bob and Pete in your hands.”

“More importantly, I’ve got you in my hands,” White added. “An accident in an abandoned mine in the middle of nowhere is much easier to bring about than in a salvage yard in Rocky Beach. So it will be to everyone’s benefit if you now tell me why the Fiery Eye is in this mine... and then lead me to its hiding place.”

“Gabriel!” Helena cried suddenly. “Trouble! I see the two boys in the side mirror. They’re creeping around the car park.”

White did not hesitate for a second. “Vikram, drive off!” he ordered.

The sliding door was still open.

Jupiter was as surprised as everyone else, but he sensed a chance—a chance to escape! It’s now or never!

Jupiter catapulted himself from his fruit crate, pushed Bruce and White aside. He wanted to jump out of the van, but Bruce was faster. He grabbed the First Investigator by the upper arm and held him tight. Jupiter fought back with all his might. He kicked Mr White so hard that he fell out of the side door. Bruce threw the First Investigator to the back of the van.

“Hey!” cried Jupiter at the top of his lungs.

The next moment, Bruce reached out of the side door, got hold of Mr White, and pulled him back into the van.

“Drive off!” White ordered Vikram again.

Vikram stepped on the accelerator and everyone tumbled. The sliding door crashed shut. Jupiter tried to pick himself up but the van turned sharply and he immediately fell over. His head was pressed against the wall.

“Slow down!” ordered White. “We don’t want to draw the attention of the police! Are those two still behind us?”

“No,” Helena said, her eyes still fixed on the wing mirror. “They were on foot. I didn’t see their car.”

White roughly dragged Jupiter out of his awkward position and sat him on a fruit crate. “That had better be your last stupid attempt, Jupiter, I’m telling you! Do something like that again and you’ll regret it. Why have your friends returned to the car park?”

Jupiter rubbed the back of his aching head. “Of course, I can only speculate, Mr White.”

“Then speculate!”

“They have become suspicious.”

“How?”

“They are investigators—smart investigators... like me.”

“What do they know?”

“Apparently enough not to trust you.”

White’s eyes flashed angrily. “Vikram!” he shouted to the front of the driver’s cab. “On to Elizabeth Lake now!”

As Vikram steered the van into the road heading north, Jupiter began thinking about what had just happened. White had given nothing away in his conversation with Pete and Bob. Nevertheless, his two friends had had a reason to turn around and sneak back to the car park. Why did they do that?

Then a light came on for Jupiter. He inconspicuously peered through the small window to the front. In the storage compartment in front of the passenger seat, among pieces of paper, receipts, sunglasses and a tattered road map, lay a white pen!

17. Back at the Mercury Mine

Jupiter tried not to let on, but his heart beat faster.

They left Camarillo on the road that led inland. The landscape became mountainous, and there was little street lighting and hardly any houses.

“So,” Gabriel White said abruptly. “Now that this... somewhat upsetting part of the evening is behind us and we still have a little time before we reach our destination, I suggest you finally tell me how the Fiery Eye got to that old mine.”

“I hid it there.”

“Young August August sold it to Rama Sidri Rhandur,” Mr White corrected him.

“Yes, but the stone he sold him was a fake.”

White raised his eyebrows. “August told me the story of that time in great detail. He also spoke of a forgery. It turned up much earlier and was recognized as such by Mr Rhandur.”

“That’s right,” Jupe confirmed, “but the stone that Rhandur finally bought from us was not the real Fiery Eye either. Horatio August had laid two false tracks, not one. None of us realized that at the time. After Mr Rhandur bought the stone from Gus, the case seemed closed for us. Still, I did not let it go. I wanted to know more about the Fiery Eye and Horatio’s story. At some point in my follow-up investigations, I came across the real Fiery Eye, which had been even better hidden than the second fake.”

“In the mercury mine?”

“No. It doesn’t matter where I found it. What matters is that it was never my intention to keep it. In fact, I wanted to give it to Mr Rhandur. After all, he had paid a large sum and received only a fake in return. However, my attempts to track him down failed. At the same time, I realized that it was dangerous to keep the stone.”

“Because of the curse?”

“Of course not... because of people like you. As we can see, I was right in that assessment.”

“So you were looking for a place to hide it,” White surmised.

The First Investigator nodded. “We went on a school trip to Elizabeth Lake and visited the mine. I found the ideal place there. No one would look for the Fiery Eye there. It was a place with no connection to me and reasonably far away from where I live.”

“Why didn’t your friends know about this?”

“The search for the Fiery Eye was for my own amusement. When I finally found it, I decided not to tell them about it to protect them.”

“So why were you there on Sunday?”

“I go there occasionally to see if the Fiery Eye is still in its hiding place. I always go alone, of course, but that time, I had to take Bob and Pete with me, otherwise they would have become suspicious. However, I didn’t tell them the real reason for that trip.”

“Hmm...” White wondered, putting his fingertips together.

“It would have suited Horatio to plant two fakes,” White finally admitted. “He had always been a secretive man. Back in India he had disappeared for weeks. When he suddenly reappeared, all he said was that he found nothing of value in Pleshiwar.”

White struck a strangely confidential tone. Jupiter hoped he would go on talking, as he might give himself away with every word.

“You were in India together?” the First Investigator asked cautiously.

White nodded, barely visible in the darkness of the vehicle. “It was our mission to find the maharaja’s treasure.”

“Your... your mission?”

“Yes. Horatio was one of us... at Sphinx. Didn’t you know that? He was older than me and kind of a mentor to me. He was supposed to teach me how Sphinx worked, but then he went to Pleshiwar alone. When he returned a few weeks later, he claimed to have found nothing. He just said that the Temple of Justice had disappeared, but not a word about the Fiery Eye or the Silver Hand.

“I only know about it because I found the two items among his possessions... but I was young and inexperienced and had no idea what I was looking at. Horatio told me they were just cheap souvenirs. I only found out that this was a lie decades later—to be exact, barely three weeks ago when I read the ancient manuscripts from the temple that speak of the Fiery Eye and the Silver Hand.”

White had lost himself in his memories for a moment. Now he straightened his shoulders and ended the subject. “Well... We’ll see in a moment how much of your story is true.”

The First Investigator breathed an inward sigh of relief. The interrogation seemed to be over. His hand wandered unobtrusively to his trouser pocket. From the outside, he felt the padlock. It calmed his nerves immediately.

White turned forward to the driver’s cab. “What did you learn on your mission, Helena?”

“I got into the salvage yard through the secret entrance Vikram told me. I could overhear the two boys and their parents. The boys said that they had tracked down Horatio’s old girlfriend and were going to see her. Her name is Bonnie Newman and she lives in Oxnard. Suddenly, they heard me, so I had to run. In fact, they almost caught me.”

“Is that all?” asked White angrily.

“No. I went straight to Bonnie Newman’s house to beat the boys to it, but the old lady was pretty rattled. She didn’t know what I wanted from her. She couldn’t tell me anything about Horatio, the ruby or the Hand. I searched her place, but found nothing. When one of the boys finally showed up with his father, she mistook the father for some neighbour or something. I’m sorry, Gabriel, but there’s nothing from Bonnie Newman.”

Mr White was visibly unhappy, but finally he murmured: “We don’t need Bonnie Newman. Once we have the Fiery Eye, the rest will be a piece of cake!”

Without much traffic at this time, they reached Elizabeth Lake an hour later and bumped along a pitch-dark sandy track to the mercury mine. Vikram came to a stop in the deserted visitors’ car park.

“So, my young friend,” White said, pulling open the side door. “Here ends our journey!”

Jupiter got out of the van. The moonlight highlighted the outline of the mountains against the night sky. The mine was more than three kilometres from the nearest human habitation. No one lived this far out in the country. After the continuous rumbling inside the van, the sudden silence crashed over them like a wave. Only the distant howl of a coyote could be heard.

Unobtrusively, Juve looked back at the road. There was no sign of Bob and Pete. On the one hand, Jupiter was glad because White and his gang would have noticed them

immediately out here in the loneliness. On the other hand, it probably meant that they had not followed the van at all.

Were his friends really around? Or was he all alone out here?

“Where is it?” asked White impatiently, looking at the First Investigator sharply. “Where do we have to go?”

“That way,” Jupiter said, pointing in the direction of the entrance to the mine site. It was fenced off, and the wire mesh gate was secured with a chain and a lock. “Maybe there’s a hole in the fence,” Jupiter muttered.

Then Bruce held up a large bolt cutter he had taken from the van. In no time at all, he had cut the chain with the heavy tool. It fell to the ground with a rattle. The huge man then pushed the gate open.

Jupiter led the gang across the site, which was dominated by the foothills of a ridge. They walked past the half-ruined buildings with their rusty corrugated iron roofs and old conveyor belts.

The entrance to the mine was on the other side of the hill. It was a steel door—more specifically, double-leaf steel doors with D-type pull handles on each. Looped around the two handles was a chain secured with a heavy-duty padlock. Even that was no obstacle for Bruce. With a bit of effort, the huge man cut the chain.

The door swung open and a gush of musty air hit them.

“Maybe someone should stay outside,” Jupiter suggested meekly.

As expected, White’s ears perked up. “Why?”

“To stand guard... in case someone comes.”

White shook his head. “Jupiter, Jupiter... another attempt at deception? We’ll all go in, of course. Helena, did you bring the lamp from the van?”

“Sure, Gabriel,” Helena said, shining her light through the door into the dark tunnel.

“Let’s go then!” White instructed.

Helena took the lead. Then came Vikram, Jupiter and Gabriel White. Bruce brought up the rear. He was like a walking wall that no one could get past.

Jupe directed them along the visitor route. His fear grew with every step. Suddenly he was sure that his plan would fail. Too much depended on chance. Too much could go wrong, but he could not go back.

Involuntarily, he fumbled again for the padlock in his pocket, but the calming effect no longer set in. Finally, they reached the cavern with the pit cage.

Jupiter’s heart was pounding up to his throat. “We’re here.”

18. “Here You Are!”

Gabriel White, Helena, Vikram and Bruce looked around attentively while Helena shone her lamp around. With the little light, Jupiter quickly looked around. He noticed that the pit cage was now back at the ground level of the cavern, and the control device with the cable still attached, was now hung on a hook on one side of the wall.

“Fine,” White said. “Where’s the hiding place?”

“There...” Jupiter pointed to the pit cage. Helena shone her light in that direction.

Under the ‘Out of Order’ notice, there was now another sign that had not been there on his last visit. It said: ‘Danger! Entry Strictly Prohibited!’

“The Fiery Eye is in the pit cage?” White frowned. “I don’t think so. I don’t see anything there.”

“Not in it,” Jupe said. “Above it! In the shaft!”

They stepped closer to the shaft and Helena shone her light upwards. The lamp made the shadows dance on the uneven rock face of the shaft.

“I don’t see anything,” White said.

“It’s hard to see because the rock surface is uneven,” Jupiter admitted, “but it’s there—in a little cavity in the wall.”

“Where?”

“Well, up there,” Jupe said as his fingers nervously played with the padlock in his trouser pocket.

“How do you get up there?” White barked.

“Use the pit cage of course,” Jupe replied.

“Do you want us to get into this ramshackle pit cage, go up and crash with it?” asked White. “If this is another attempt at deception... I have already warned you, Jupiter!”

“It’s not an attempt at deception. The hiding place is up there,” Jupiter insisted. “You just can’t see it from down here.”

White laughed out. “You can’t see it? Like the temple that had disappeared? Has the Fiery Eye made itself invisible to protect itself from the eyes of the unbelievers? Really, Jupiter, if you’re wasting my time here—”

“It’s right up there!” Jupiter interrupted him.

“Okay, wise guy,” White said. “Why don’t you get into the cage, go up and get the ruby. Bruce, you go with him!”

Jupe hesitated, but as Bruce went up to him, the First Investigator unhooked the chain and slowly crept into the cage. When Bruce had joined him, Jupe pressed the ‘Up’ button on the control unit.

Nothing happened.

“Now what?” White snapped.

“I don’t know,” Jupe said. “It worked the other day.”

“Get out of the cage, you rascal,” White instructed and Jupe obeyed. “Helena, shine the light into the shaft and Bruce, see if you can see anything from inside the cage.”

“I only see shadows up there,” Bruce said. “I need more light.”

“This can’t be!” White shouted angrily and stopped staring up into the shaft. Instead, he looked Jupiter straight in the eye. Then his gaze wandered along Jupe’s arm. “What are you doing fiddling in your pocket all the time?”

Jupiter winced.

“What have you got in there?” White asked. “Come on, show me!”

Jupiter swallowed and pulled out the only object besides the padlock in his pocket—a crumpled piece of paper.

White took it from his hand. “What’s this? Helena, shine the light over here!”

Helena came closer and directed the beam of light onto the paper.

Quick as a flash, Jupe struck at the lamp with his hand. With a startled cry, Helena let it fall to the ground. The light danced around the room. Jupiter swung his foot and slammed his heel down on the lamp with all his might. The plastic casing shattered and the light went out.

“You little fat snot!” cursed Helena. “Does anyone else have a lamp?”

“No,” Bruce muttered, “but I saw some device hanging on the wall over there. Maybe it is the light switch—”

“Not now,” White interrupted him curtly. His voice was low, but its icy tone froze everyone. “We don’t need a light. I saw what the paper was. It was the photocopy from a book describing the legend of the maharaja. You got it from my notebook at the fortress.”

It was pitch dark, but Jupiter felt White’s proximity like a cold breeze. He said nothing.

“You stole it from my notebook,” White continued as he slowly grasped the truth. “You read the notebook. That was how you knew so much—about the Silver Hand... about Sphinx... about everything! Apart from that, you really don’t know anything!” White’s voice grew louder and louder. “You... you’ve been lying to me all along! The whole story about the fake Fiery Eye and your hiding place here in this mine... they were all lies!”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “I told you the truth that I didn’t know anything about the Fiery Eye, but you chose not to believe me.”

“Just you wait! That was your last deception, Jupiter Jones!” hissed White in anger. “Luring me here, stealing my precious time—all for nothing! You will pay for this! And so will your family and your friends! You’ll regret it for the rest of your life!”

“Oh, it wasn’t for nothing,” Jupiter calmly said.

“Oh no?”

“No, but it’s hard to explain in the dark.”

White hesitated only briefly. “Bruce! What did you just say about a light switch?”

“There’s some sort of a device hanging on the wall back there, I think.”

“Go check it out!” White ordered.

Bruce ignited a lighter and got out of the cage. Then he and Helena went to the control device and looked at it. “Yeah, it’s a light switch,” Bruce said and then pressed the button labelled ‘Light’.

The pit cage rattled to life. Everyone was surprised—all except Jupiter.

With Bruce’s dim lighter as the only source of light, Jupiter ran to the pit cage which was steadily rising, and jumped in.

“Stop him!” shouted White.

By the time Bruce and Helena turned around, they couldn’t even see where Jupiter was... but White could. He ran towards the rising pit cage and grabbed the bottom part of it. The pit cage continued to go up with White hanging on to it. However, he was not strong enough to pull himself up. Then the top of the pit cage disappeared into the shaft.

Shocked and incredulous, Gabriel White stared at the First Investigator.

“You were wrong earlier, Mr White,” Jupiter shouted down. “This is my last deception!”

“Stop the cage! Stop the cage!” White yelled out.

Bruce frantically pressed the buttons on the control device, but he could not stop the pit cage. At the last second, before the shaft could crush him, White let go and fell down hard on the ground.

Jupiter no longer heard what happened next. The pit cage slipped into darkness and the shouts and screams of the gang were lost in the loud rattling noise of the ancient machine.

With bated breath, Jupe waited for the pit cage to reach the top of the shaft... but instead it came to a sudden grinding halt.

At first Jupiter did not understand what was happening, but then it dawned on him. Bruce had probably torn all the cables out of the control device and thus cut off the power supply!

Anyway, Jupiter already felt fresh air through the top of the cage. When he looked up, he saw the starry sky. Only the grating above his head still separated him from freedom.

In no time at all, Jupiter took out the soiled bandage from his trouser pocket and twisted it into a short makeshift rope. He threaded it through a few meshes. Then he grabbed the ends of the rope and hung on to it with all his weight.

The cage ceiling creaked downwards until it broke at a rusted spot and gaped open. Rust trickled down. Jupiter bent the resulting hole in the ceiling open as far as he could. Then he tried to pull himself up. He had to try!

“Come on!” he gasped. “I’ll manage... for once in my life... to climb out of something!”

He tortured himself. He scraped his skin on the rusty wire mesh. He groaned and moaned, but finally his hands were out and his feet found a foothold on the bent mesh. After that it was suddenly very light and finally Jupiter stood sweaty and dirty in the open air. His arms were shaking, but he was free!

Frantically, Jupiter looked around and found a large piece of corrugated iron. He dragged it to the shaft and pushed it halfway into the pit cage. If they managed to get the thing moving again, the metal would hopefully wedge the pit cage.

After that was done, Jupiter ran down the hill. It was so dark that he had to be careful not to trip.

At the bottom, he ran to the mine entrance. The steel door was still open. Behind it was the dark tunnel. The chain that Bruce had cut earlier was on the ground.

Suddenly, Jupe noticed at the far end of the tunnel, the lights of two mobile phones danced. They were fast approaching.

“There’s that rascal!” he heard Helena shout in a rage. “We’ll get you! You can’t lock us up!”

“Sure I can,” Jupiter muttered and threw the door shut. Then he picked up the remainder of the chain and looped it around the pull handles. Next he took the padlock out of his pocket and let it snap shut around two chain links such that the chain loop was as small as possible.

A moment later, the gang had reached the door. They banged wildly on it and shouted in confusion. Jupiter could see the door tremble furiously when Bruce the Bull rammed it. However, the door and the chain held on.

Satisfied, Jupiter tore himself away. At some point, the gang might be able to free themselves. By then, the police had to be on the scene. Jupiter could only call them from the next inhabited house... or he found Pete and Bob—if they were even around here at all.

Jupe ran back to the car park. The van was not locked and luckily, the key was in the ignition. He started the engine and drove off heading back to the main road where they came from. Then a thought occurred to him—he hadn’t seen his friends earlier because they could have taken a different route to the mine! His clever friends!

He made a sudden U-turn and drove away from the main road. He drove so fast that the van bounced and rocked on the uneven ground, causing little stones to splash to the side.

Suddenly the glaring beam of the headlights caught two figures.

The First Investigator slammed on the brakes. On the sandy gravel, the van lurched and turned sideways before coming to a stop.

Jupiter's heart leapt. He rolled down the side window. "Oh, here you are! I've been looking for you everywhere!"

*To be continued in
Part III: The Golden Path.*